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My Time With Marguerite Tjader

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(Love That Will Not Let Me Go: My Time With Theodore Dreiser, Marguerite Tjader's memoir about her relationship with the novelist, was published by Peter Lang in the autumn of 1998. Larry Hussman prefaced, annotated, and edited it. In this essay, he recounts his own relationship with Tjader.)

On the occasion of Dreiser's birth centennial in mid-August of 1971, Indiana State University at Terre Haute, his hometown, staged a major conference celebrating his life and works. I had been eagerly anticipating the event, since I had become a Dreiser *aficionado* while pursuing a literature doctorate at the University of Michigan in the sixties. My dissertation had been centered on Dreiser's alleged religious affirmation just before his death in 1945, a stage of his life that was, even by the 1970s, little understood and seldom remarked. So I was looking forward with some excitement to discussing Dreiser's last days with the many major critics and academics whose names appeared on the impressive announcement of the conference lectures. I had also by then absorbed enough Dreiserian desire through the pages of his novels to hope for a meeting with the novelist's great niece Tedi, a professional singer-dancer who, according to the conference brochure featuring her enticing photo, would be interpreting some Broadway show tunes written by Dreiser's brother Paul.

But in those dragging pre-conference moments when my scholarly interest in literature trumped my libido, I most looked forward to the possibility of meeting Marguerite Tjader, editor in the thirties of the important crusading journal *Direction*, but

also at times Dreiser's literary secretary and, I later learned, his intermittent mistress among many. A major news magazine article about the upcoming centennial had singled out Marguerite as its most prominent participant and a notable literary leftist of a bygone era. My interest, however, centered on her lesser known role as one of Dreiser's confidantes in his last three years. During that period, she had been in California helping him finish his posthumously published "Quaker novel," *The Bulwark*. That book's protagonist's victory over Jobian adversities through devotion to the "Inner Light" had caught contemporary critics off guard, especially since the book had originally been planned in 1912 to be an attack on religion as irrelevant or destructive in twentieth-century context. Even as late as 1971, despite or perhaps because of the fact that Marguerite had attested to the honesty of the novelist's late spiritual affirmation in her 1965 book *Theodore Dreiser: A New Dimension*, critics tended to view that avowal as insincere. This skepticism had been owing in large part to the barely suppressed suspicion among certain critics and scholars, even as late as the seventies, that Dreiser's wife Helen and Marguerite had unduly influenced his thinking and that *The Bulwark* was more the product of their thinking than of his. After all, Helen had by then enthusiastically introduced the novelist to the Hollywood version of Hinduism that colors the last pages of *The Stoic* and Marguerite's conversion to Roman Catholicism, like Dreiser's late passage to his more amorphous spiritual position, had taken place in the 1940s. So I anticipated meeting Marguerite at the centennial in the hope that she could shed some further light on Dreiser's state of mind during his final years. Little did I know that she would become one of the most treasured of my friends over the next decade-and-a-half.

The occasion of our meeting was a cocktail party given by Indiana State professor Dick Dowell and Mrs. Dowell the evening before the opening of the conference. The discussions at the gathering soon heated up, and I was plunged into animated conversation with a number of Dreiserians who would also become friends and correspondents over the years—Dowell, Fred Rusch, Phil Gerber, Neda Westlake, Ernest Griffen, and others. I also had a minor "run in" with Ellen

Moers. I told her that I had enjoyed her book *Two Dreisers* but wondered why she had done so little in it to defend one of its more provocative propositions, namely the claim in her preface that Dreiser was “a great novelist, perhaps the greatest of the Americans.” Moers, who struck a haughty pose, apparently didn’t realize that I was agreeing with her assessment and merely asking for amplification. Instead, she took umbrage at my impertinence. “Who are *you*?” she snarled, and stomped off in a cloud of smoke from her cigarette ensconced in its shiny black holder, an affectation that made her look like F.D.R. in drag.

Shortly after my encounter with Moers, I was introduced to Marguerite, and the contrast couldn’t have been more stark. Here was a woman of seventy who was supremely alive, totally responsive, utterly unpretentious. It was easy to see how she could have been one of “Dreiser’s women.” Even now, she radiated sensuality and intellect, her penetrating blue eyes, flowing red hair, and bright mind an invitation to intimacy of the kind the novelist craved, and found irresistible in women. Had there not been thirty years difference in our ages at our meeting and a good fifteen before May-December alliances in which the younger partner was the man would become acceptable if not almost routine in America, I’m certain I would have been totally smitten by Marguerite myself. I’m also sure that the double standard still operating during Marguerite’s later years must have galled her, since she was only twenty-six when she had fallen in love with the fifty-seven-year-old Dreiser and now that she was older but still brimming with vitality, younger men were expected to pursue still younger women. Be that as it may, I couldn’t resist her stories of her time with Dreiser. When she learned of my curiosity about her role in his last years, she began plying me with anecdotes and descriptions of the circumstances surrounding the composition of *The Bulwark*. By the end of the evening, she had convinced me that its message of spirituality over materialism was indeed Dreiser’s, not just hers or Helen’s, reinforcing the conclusion I had reached in my dissertation a decade earlier by dint of charting the novelist’s emotional development from *Sister Carrie* onward. At any rate, over the course of the evening at the Dowells’, our friendship

was launched.

The opening sessions of the conference also rewarded my anticipation. Nearly a hundred Dreiser enthusiasts from all over the world—Russia, Sweden, Japan, among other countries—sparked lively critiques of his life, his novels and short stories, even his much less important plays and poetry. No gathering since has ever matched for me the heady pleasure of interacting with so many Dreiserians at once. The Indiana State hosts' (Dowell, Rusch, Robert Saalbach) hospitality easily offset the deficiencies of the venue. (A friend had prepared me for Terre Haute by telling me he had spent a month there one Saturday night.) Not even the typical academic banquet, cafeteria style and featuring on each diner's plate a yellow square stamped with block letters literally spelling MARGARINE and figuratively "cheap" could dampen the days of the conference, much of which I spent with Marguerite reacting to the various speakers and their points of view. I remember our discussing the attitude displayed by Charles Shapiro, who had written a book about Dreiser but who now apparently regarded him as an terribly inferior writer.

When the conference ended, Marguerite and I resolved to keep in touch, and in fact our long correspondence began the following week, my initial note of satisfaction at having met her answered by her short letter noting our "parallel perceptions."

There was one matter on which our perceptions were not in sync, however. At this point in late 1971, Marguerite was into the final editing, with John McAleer, of Dreiser's *Notes on Life* for the University of Alabama Press. She was utterly convinced that these mostly mind-numbing observations constituted a neglected masterpiece in the making, and that they were essential to an understanding of the novelist's philosophy of existence. I believed then and still do that all of his important ideas are readily accessible in his novels. But no matter how hard I might try, I could never convince Marguerite that, to use a generic barb favored by one of my colleagues, the boring *Notes on Life* would only "fill a much needed gap." What I proposed instead in my next letter to her was that we cooperate in an effort to get *The Bulwark* back in print. There had been, after the 1946 Doubleday first edition disappeared from the

remainder bins, a Popular Library paperback, but that too had been removed from availability. Marguerite embraced the idea of a new edition enthusiastically but insisted that the text should be based on the original typescript, a copy of which she had retained throughout the squabble, well known by Dreiserians, between her and Helen as well as several others over the novel's final form. Nothing came of our repeated attempts to spur a new American edition in the ensuing months and years, although I was asked in 1973 to do a preface to the novel for a British edition published by Cedric Chivers.

In the meanwhile, Marguerite and I cemented our friendship with a week of research and socializing in Philadelphia, during my second stay there researching in Penn's Van Pelt Library. She had completed the editing of *Notes on Life* except for correcting the proofs and she was finishing the first of her books on Swedish religious figures, *Mother Elisabeth*. She was also trying to interest a publisher in an early version of a Dreiser memoir about which she was very enthusiastic. This was the reminiscence of her personal relationship with the novelist, then called *The Lust of the Goat is the Bounty of God* after the Blake aphorism, and finally posthumously brought out this year as *Love That Will Not Let Me Go*.

We would meet every morning at the library, Marguerite coming from her favorite stopping place in the city, the Hamilton Motor Inn at 39th and Chestnut, and I from the Divine Tracy, the quirky hotel established in the 1920s by the charismatic black preacher Father Divine and recommended to me by Neda Westlake, then keeper of the Dreiser Papers for Penn. The Divine Tracy was well known to frugal visiting scholars in those days. A nearby Holiday Inn charged something like forty-five dollars per night at the time, but a clean, not so well-lighted place at the Tracy went for a rate of thirty-two dollars for a week. Of course, instead of a television set, each room was furnished with a sewing machine and the floors were separated by gender. The staff was wonderful, however, and their greeting on each return for the evening, prefaced by "God bless Father and Mother," was a unique experience.

Two evenings during that week working with Marguerite

also stand out in my memory. On one we went together, at my suggestion, to a Philadelphia Orchestra concert. I was anxious for Marguerite to hear some Mahler, whose symphonies were a great enthusiasm of mine at the time. I had discovered the composer's works while I was in graduate school, in the days before his great popularity, when any conductor ambitious enough to mount one of his huge orchestral works was rewarded with the "Mahler medal." Mahler had always seemed to me a kindred artistic spirit of Dreiser's, an emotional rather than an intellectual giant. I was particularly intent on taking Marguerite to the Philadelphia concert, because the orchestra would be playing the Ninth Symphony, a work that compared strikingly with *The Bulwark* in that both the music and the fiction exuded a serene end-of-life resignation. Marguerite, who despite her musical sophistication professed to know little about Mahler, was resistant to my invitation at first. She insisted that she had reached the time in her life when she preferred silence to even the greatest music. But I prevailed, and she was much taken by the concert and the parallels between Mahler and Dreiser. She even received a special bonus when she spotted among the audience Dorothy Day, the famous pacifist and co-founder of the Catholic Worker movement who, like Marguerite, displayed the fervor for the faith often adopted by converts.

On another evening during our week in Philadelphia I got a glimpse of what an amusing "character" Marguerite was. We were walking the streets searching for a restaurant for dinner when I spotted a Polynesian place that looked inviting. When we entered, my suspicion, formed at the concert earlier, that Marguerite tended to create a scene wherever she went was confirmed. I don't mean this in any negative sense. It was just that she talked in an animated way, especially when the subject was Dreiser, so that everyone in the room paid attention. On this night at the restaurant she was talking about Dreiser's contributions to *Direction*, and by the time we were seated with our menus she was invoking the names of other contributors like John Dos Passos, Richard Wright, and Erskine Caldwell. Everyone in the place seemed to be eavesdropping. Finally our waitress arrived and suggested a drink. I agreed but Marguerite declined. The waitress cajoled. Marguerite relented. Shortly the

waitress reappeared with two tropical drinks approximately the size of the South Pacific at high tide. Marguerite insisted that the waitress take hers back, that she couldn't possibly drink so much. Again, the waitress cajoled as the patrons watched and listened. Again, Marguerite relented. Then she re-energized her tsunami of stories while she sipped. Within two minutes I heard the rat-a-tat-tat of her straw striking the sea bed and she asked me to order her another of those "wonderful drinks." By the time the food arrived we were both several sails to the breeze.

Over the next couple of years our correspondence developed steadily. Marguerite sent me a copy of the finally published *Notes on Life* with a simple inscription I still find flattering: "For Larry Hussman who understands Dreiser." In turn, I was able to put her on to a scheduled session on John Cowper Powys, a Dreiser friend and one of her favorite writers, at the 1974 MLA convention in New York. I didn't attend that convention myself, but Marguerite did and sent me word of the Powys session. It had heartened her with the news that a revival of the Welshman's works was taking place, especially in England, and that Colgate University was publishing a Powys newsletter. She was especially enthused when the session chair held up her copy of *Notes on Life*, with its flamboyant 1946 essay by Powys on Dreiser serving as its introduction, for all to see. This opportunity to push the *Notes* made up in part for her disappointment that Maxwell Geismar had recently backed away from a decision to write a piece about the book, because, to use Marguerite's words in a letter to me, he couldn't "make it fit in to being a good Marxist." She was even more pleased when I arranged to focus on the mostly overlooked edition of the *Notes* for *The Antioch Review*. This was in the spring of 1975, and Marguerite took advantage of the season to book passage on a cruise ship to Sweden, in order to introduce her grandchildren to her father's beloved country.

When she returned to the States to complete the final editorial work on her second religious book, *Birgitta of Sweden*, she wrote me excitedly that she had received Neda Westlake's announcement of University of Pennsylvania's Dreiser editions project. She hoped that this would clear the way for the reissue of *The Bulwark* in the version that she regarded as Dreiser's

own, but she also worried that the textually edited novels would be issued chronologically, which has indeed been the case, and that *The Bulwark* would be relegated to Penn's back burner.

By the fall of 1976, Marguerite was writing me in greater detail about her proposed new Dreiser book, which she had been recently working on and which she conceived at that point more as a "study" of Dreiser's "philosophy of love" than as a memoir of her time with him. She wanted my advice on how she should proceed, and so we made arrangements to meet at the Modern Language Association convention in New York where I would read and assess her manuscript as it had thus far developed. We also planned to spend a day at her place in Darien discussing the manuscript and our attempts to get *The Bulwark* reissued. The convention and my drive up to Connecticut provided me with several indelible memories.

That year Paul Orlov chaired a convention session featuring Donald Pizer, Richard Lehan, and Charles Shapiro on *An American Tragedy*, and I joined Marguerite there. At the end of one of the talks that she found insufficiently respectful of Dreiser's accomplishment in the novel, she stood up and gave an impassioned defense that showed she had learned something about proselytizing from her evangelist parents. Many of the assembled scholars, already aware of her reputation as a no doubt biased apologist and hagiographer, seemed thoroughly abashed. But thanks to my earlier encounter with Marguerite in Philadelphia, I had come to view such outbursts as the product of a thoroughly admirable devotion to the memory of the man she had loved so fiercely during his lifetime.

On the last evening after the MLA sessions, Marguerite and I had dinner at Luchow's German restaurant, then a Manhattan fixture on East 14th, one of the favorite meeting spots of Dreiser and H. L. Mencken in the twenties. The place has since disappeared from the New York scene, but then it was a tourist target at Christmas time, with its specialties including roast goose and venison, and its strolling violinists and German band playing holiday music. On this particular occasion, Marguerite brought with her several letters from Powys to Dreiser, handwritten curiosities that could pass for works of abstract art in their weird transitions from swollen, sprawling cursive to

microscopic printing, from vertical to horizontal progression on the page and back again. Once more, Marguerite was the obvious object of much attention by fellow diners, and by the end of our meal accompanied by anecdotes and festive fare, she pronounced my newly grown beard “devastating” and my general appearance “distinguished.” (Men should always be alarmed by the latter “accolade,” since it is the adjective applied just short of “spry.”)

The next morning I drove Marguerite, who had come to the city by train, back to Vikingsborg, the imposing Tjader estate on Tokeneke Trail in Darien. The sprawling complex, thanks to Marguerite’s beneficence, had long since been in the hands of the Sisters of St. Birgitta. They had established a convent there. Six impressive buildings, including the huge structure that had been the summer home of Marguerite’s Swedish parents but that now housed the main convent, graced the expansive grassy acreage that led down to Long Island Sound. Marguerite was living in a not-so-small carriage house, on the top floor. She took me on a quick tour of the estate, starting with the main convent house where I met some of the sisters and marveled at the collected works of art, brought by Marguerite from all over the world. She was especially proud of the chapel, with its stained glass windows done through her commission by the renowned French artist Jean Lurçat.

We spent the rest of the day in the carriage house, Marguerite regaling me with stories of her working with Dreiser on *The Bulwark*, while I looked over the proposed memoir. (She gave me that day a copy of the May 2, 1945, page from a desk calendar inscribed “Finish *The Bulwark*” and bearing her signature, her son Hilary’s, and Dreiser’s.) The memoir manuscript left something to be desired because Marguerite’s remembrances were interrupted throughout by often gratuitous quotes from the *Notes on Life*, and the writing in general wasn’t up to the standard she had set with her earlier Dreiser book. She was determined to use much of the material she had been forced by space limitations to eliminate from her edition of the *Notes*. I tried to convince her to accentuate her personal interaction with Dreiser, Helen, and others in their circle while jettisoning or at least downplaying the *Notes*. But I also encouraged her to

continue with the project, because I thought her correspondence with Dreiser and her memory of him and their work together on *The Bulwark* would be important to bequeath to posterity. Moreover, there were flashes in her text of the sort of prose that had earned for her Geismar's compliment on the dust jacket of her *New Dimension* that of all the "ladies on Dreiser," she was the best writer, "acute, sensitive, intelligent." I was especially struck by several gorgeous lines scattered throughout the manuscript, among them the poetic lament that some of Dreiser's meditations during the last days of his life "must have been lost, absorbed into the sunlight, or fallen into the silence of the grass." In the editing process I undertook after Marguerite's death, I moved this line to the very end of the text, to give it greater prominence.

But during that day at Vikingsborg in 1976, I mostly marveled at Marguerite as a person. She was obviously still very much in love with Dreiser, of whom she spoke with a reverence that only the most cynical critic could fail to find touching. More than once, she pointed out Dreiser's death mask, rendered by the Italian sculptor Edgard Simone, which she had displayed in a glass case in the carriage house. The irony that this most intimate likeness of the great, brooding "naturalist" had come to reside on the grounds of an institution run by his hated Catholic Church was not lost on me. (Then again, perhaps this made some sense since the institution was a convent and Dreiser had always been fascinated by "impossible shes.") I kept these speculations to myself, however, not wishing to mar Marguerite's mood of tranquil enshrinement. I got the impression that as far as Dreiser was concerned, she had long since considered and resolved to her satisfaction all of his perplexing (to his critics) complexities. Furthermore, I was forcefully struck by the magnanimity of spirit with which she invariably spoke of others, a compassionate posture that admitted of few jarring notes. For example, she talked about Helen only with respect and this was also true of the other women and men in Dreiser's life, giving them all of the doubt benefits that they had sometimes denied her. This is not to say that she was at this time a plaster saint, because she was also capable of an admirable assertiveness when the occasion called

for it. But her great sympathy was often on display in my conversations with her during this visit, including those concerning a particular crane that was missing from his usual spot on the dock that she could see from a carriage house window. She sensed somehow that the bird might be in trouble, because of the terrible weather, and looked for it hourly to no avail.

When I returned to Ohio, I received a letter from Marguerite expressing her pleasure at my visit and outlining plans for revising the memoir. She included news that the missing crane had reappeared to her “amazement,” and described it in the poetic prose that I had come to expect from her: “After a night of snow-storm, sitting in his endless meditation, a part of all that grey-white landscape—concentrating it in himself, like a bird by Graves. . . . Do you know that artist who seems to capture all the mystery and silence of sea-birds?” In the immediately following months, we corresponded about revisions of the memoir, and she continued her pursuit of possible publishers for it, compiling a list that would eventually include Penn, Texas, Emory, Crown, Brazillier, and others. She began writing pessimistically about the prospect of getting the memoir accepted in her lifetime, and suggesting that were she to die before seeing the project through to its conclusion, I should look after it.

Marguerite and I met again at the MLA convention for 1978 in New York, and I made another, this time even more eventful trip to Vikingsborg. On the last evening of the conference, we were picked up by Marguerite’s filmmaker son Hilary and taken to a party at his Eighth Avenue loft. There were a number of East Coast and West Coast movie personalities present, but the highlight of the party was a screening of Hilary’s Academy Award-winning, surreal documentary *Organism*, which compares the inner workings of New York City to the functioning of the human body through the use of time-lapse and microphotography.

The next morning, the time Marguerite and I had planned to go to Connecticut, an impressive snowstorm greeted us outside the window of the hotel lobby where we met to begin the trip. The plan called for us to pick up her car stored at a

Manhattan garage and, as she was wont to say, “motor” up to her place where I would stay for a couple of days while we discussed her prospects. Both getting to Connecticut and my interlude there this time meshed with the estimate of Jack Salzman, who had spent a day with Marguerite in New York. Jack had written me that he found her a truly fascinating personality. By the end of my two-day experience, I had come to view Jack’s assessment as conservative. First a “scene” ensued when Marguerite disagreed with the taxi driver, who was taking us to the garage where her car awaited, about the accuracy of his meter. After that debate was settled, another erupted when the garage manager presented her with what she judged to be an exorbitant bill. During this wrangle, I was standing by the garage elevator waiting for Marguerite’s car, which I hadn’t seen before, to be brought down from the second floor. I knew, of course, that Marguerite had given most of her fortune to the nuns, but still I thought it possible that the lift would lower a shiny new Mercedes or Rolls Royce. To my considerable shock, an attendant drove up a battered, fifteen-year old Valiant convertible and handed her the keys. In a moment we were on our way to Darien.

I don’t think Marguerite would have minded my saying that her driving skills were not the best. As we flew through the New York streets that snowy day on our way to “pick up her dog” at Hilary’s loft, we must have run a dozen red lights. Taxis and trucks alike screeched to a stop to allow us through busy intersections, as if they knew somehow that the driver of the blue Valiant was an important person. Meanwhile, I gripped the passenger door handle and wondered if my airline accident insurance covered mishaps in flying convertibles. But we reached Hilary’s without hitting any vehicles or pedestrians, and Marguerite went upstairs to get the dog, which I hadn’t seen the previous night at the party or during my earlier trip to Vikingsborg, while I waited in the car. Soon Marguerite returned with a German shepherd whose mother must have been bred with a Cape buffalo, the biggest, fiercest looking specimen I had ever seen. Still, he seemed low key enough after he clamored into the back seat, and we were once again on our way.

Marguerite had one more diversion in mind before we hit the parkway to Darien, however. She wanted to know if I had ever seen Lincoln Center, which I hadn't. The next thing I knew, we were rolling up the circular driveway and stopped in front of the concert hall. To my great surprise, Marguerite asked the policeman standing guard if she could release the dog for an exercise run, and to my complete astonishment, the officer OK'd the idea. For the next five minutes, we watched as the beast bounded around the grounds, no doubt terrorizing the public while marking his new territory.

Marguerite and I spent the next couple of days at the Vikingsborg carriage house making revisions to the memoir and plans for her to come to Ohio for a public lecture and an appearance at my upcoming spring graduate seminar devoted to Dreiser. On my last morning in Darien, she sent me off home with a breakfast made memorable not by the menu, but by another Marguerite moment. This one gave a further indication of the ascetic life she was leading since giving her fortune to the nuns. In the middle of the meal her toaster, which was apparently even older than her Valiant, caught fire. Without so much as a word, she grabbed the ancient appliance and threw it out the second floor window, apparently hoping it would flame out on the way down. I don't know whether she ever retrieved it after I left that morning.

In the spring she did make the trip to Ohio and was a huge hit both in her public lecture and in her classroom appearance, despite a couple of slipups owing to her aging. At one point during her lecture, for example, she confused her audience by mixing up Calvin Bridges, Dreiser's geneticist friend, with Calvin Coolidge. But nothing could extinguish her enthusiasm for Dreiser, and my students fell in love with her. They treated her like a rock star, buying her *New Dimension* book, remaindered copies of which she had brought with her, and asking her to autograph it. She thoroughly enjoyed the attention, after so many years of laboring in unrecognized ways to promote her vision of Dreiser and his work. I arranged for a dinner in the university's presidential dining room for her with my departmental colleagues and she charmed them throughout the evening with accounts of her literary adventures. I was

happy to be able to afford her the opportunity to speak about her favorite subjects to appreciative audiences.

After Marguerite's trip to Ohio, we never met again and our correspondence and phone calls became intermittent. This was because of complications in our lives. For the next three years I was hard into the writing of my Dreiser book for the University of Pennsylvania Press, and for those same three and an additional three also entangled in the minutia attendant on my new duties as chair of the English department at Wright State. Marguerite was also heavily involved in trying to interest a publisher in the memoir, as well as in her biography of the architect LeCorbusier. Moreover, she suffered in those years from a variety of ailments that accompanied her final decline. But we did keep in touch through the spring of 1984.

When my book came out in 1983, I immediately sent her a copy. She wrote me a congratulatory letter that expressed her pleasure that the book would doubtlessly rekindle interest in Dreiser. But I sensed in telephone conversations with her that she was not entirely pleased with my slant in the book, as I had given Dreiser less credit as a consistent thinker than she would have. During this last period of our relationship, she wrote several letters reminding me that I should try to guide her memoir through to publication if she didn't live to see to it herself. By the spring of 1984, our contact was permanently broken, much to my guilty regret. When I received word of Marguerite's death in 1986, I immediately thought of my obligation to her, and I wrote to Hilary asking for his OK to undertake an editing of her final draft, which he sent to me along with his permission to publish. I was soon enmeshed in the editing process and by late winter of 1987 had a version ready for circulation to publishers.

Then began my own long series of disappointments in trying to place the memoir. First the Indiana University Press and then the University of Pennsylvania Press passed on it, though Arthur Evans, at the time the Associate Director at Penn, suggested sending it to the University of Georgia Press. At that point, Malcolm Call, who had acquired my Dreiser book when he was Director at Penn, headed the press at Georgia. What followed were six frustrating and sometimes infuriating years of

split Georgia board decisions, numerous requests for changes and additions including extensive endnotes, even a suggestion that the memoir stood a better chance of acceptance were I a woman, and finally a negative conclusion. I also became convinced that the manuscript would be a “hard sell” because it was essentially an encomium to Dreiser at a time when memoirs had gained enormous popularity by going negative, by featuring incidents of incest or other kinds of aberrant behavior popular in the “dysfunctional family” (to use the current redundancy). By the time I left for a year of Fulbright teaching in Poland in 1993, I had almost despaired of ever discharging my duty of seeing Marguerite’s work into print. Four years later, however, while sending out a manuscript on Frank Norris’s novels, I decided to make another try with the memoir. This time, Peter Lang accepted it enthusiastically, few questions asked.

I hope that the long delayed appearance of *Love That Will Not Let Me Go* will spur interests among young Dreiserians in Marguerite and her writing. Her son Hilary has retained several finished and unfinished manuscripts of hers. These include a novel, the LeCorbusier book, and an autobiography. I have read the autobiography, and it would provide an excellent starting point for a Tjader biography. Such a book would contribute significantly to the history of the twentieth century. Besides her literary friends and acquaintances, Marguerite met, through her parents and through Dreiser and his circle, many of the towering cultural icons of the times. Also, her 1930 published novel, *Borealis*, merits reissue on artistic grounds, as well as for its status as an artifact from a notable, early feminist. I know Marguerite would be pleased that I have pointed out to present and future scholars her posthumous potential.

Desire and Indifference in *Sister Carrie*: Neoclassical Economic Anticipations

Charles R. Lewis
Westminster College

“if we can compare the quantities . . . we do not need the
units.”

—William Stanley Jevons, *The Theory of Political Economy*

“there are only differences, *without positive terms*.”

—Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*

Sister Carrie is a naturalist melodrama in which the economy plays a leading role. What F. O. Matthiessen referred to as Theodore Dreiser’s “picture of conditions” is a novelistic representation of American capitalism toward the end of the nineteenth century, with extensive descriptions of department stores and working conditions, conspicuous consumption and grinding poverty, and individual desire and class conflict. This naturalist picture of economic conditions, however, is not a distant painterly backdrop for the story of Carrie Meeber and George Hurstwood, but is instead an important thematic and dramatic element of the novel, as is suggested in Carrie’s definition of money: “something everybody else has and I must get,” an equation in which Carrie’s desire is specifically configured as an economic problem (54). Similarly, Hurstwood’s economic decline from a middle-class saloon manager to a streetcar scab and then to an unemployed and homeless suicide exemplifies how a character’s place in the economy significantly registers his or her position in the fiction.

Economic identities and relations are crucial to Dreiser’s many representations of desire, such as sexual drive, the longing for fame, or the exhibitionist wish to be seen as spectacle. We

might even take as our trope for reading this relation between desire and economics in *Sister Carrie* the character Drouet, the travelling salesman whose “drumming” is no more confined to a single place of business than it is limited to strictly economic concerns, and for whom the marketplace is, as it were, every place.¹ Indeed, Dreiser’s pronounced concern with desire in all its configurations has led critics to address it as a key element of the novel, even, as Lawrence Hussman has suggestively described it, as the “protagonist of *Sister Carrie*” (18).²

I wish to explore two related areas of critical neglect regarding Dreiser’s representation of desire and its relation to his economic subject matter. The first one involves Dreiser’s representation of “indifference” in *Sister Carrie*. Critics have given little thought to Dreiser’s use of the concept of “indifference,” which is crucial to an understanding of how desire is structured and sustained in *Sister Carrie*. Explicit references to indifference appear in the novel more than fifty times, yet readers have not addressed Dreiser’s deployment of indifference as a naturalist trope that informs the novel’s rhetorical and figurative operations, organizes its narrative structure and use of point of view, and delineates dramatic exchanges among his characters. The variety and pervasiveness of Dreiser’s use of indifference in his representation of desire in the fictional economy of *Sister Carrie* suggests that the relationship between desire and indifference is much more extensive and complex than critics have allowed. Critics either ignore indifference or—more importantly—gloss it in terms of some binary opposition to desire. In my reading of indifference in *Sister Carrie*, I wish to explore a more fluid, dynamic, and problematic exchange between desire and indifference, as well as to argue that it constitutes a key element of *Sister Carrie*’s naturalist economy, by which I mean the economic conditions and the novelistic means by which Dreiser produces them.

The other area of critical oversight involves the absence of any discussion of neoclassical economic theory (specifically its use of marginal utility analysis), although its emergence toward the end of the nineteenth century and its analysis of individual desire, economic consumption, and market outcome point to suggestive historical and formal coincidences with Dreiser’s fiction. While I do not argue that the novel can be read as an exact mi-

metic performance of neoclassical utility theory, its concepts do provide a useful trope for exploring desire and indifference in *Sister Carrie* as economic and novelistic configurations. Put differently, neoclassical analysis anticipates the poststructuralist strains in contemporary readings of *Sister Carrie* and clarifies a number of problems that arise when such readings make reference to economic concepts and conditions.

Readers have often linked economic concepts and concerns to other aspects of novelistic form and technique in *Sister Carrie*, such as its structure, point of view, and linguistic style. Perhaps the most commonly cited connection between economic subject matter and plot structure involves Carrie's rise and Hurstwood's fall, in which narrative equilibrium is a function of economic conditions.³ In addition to novelistic structure, both Dreiser's use of point of view and his language have been addressed by critics in terms of economics.⁴ For these critics, the point is not just that economics constitutes the subject matter of *Sister Carrie*, but more importantly that narrative form and technique are themselves modes of production linked to economic conditions and concepts.

These economic interpretations all address the considerable attention Dreiser gives to desire, which provides a sort of organizational map for tracking and differentiating a number of novelistic and economic configurations. Walter Benn Michaels, for example, argues that "Carrie, for Dreiser, embodies insatiability" (56), whereas Hurstwood ultimately signifies "exhausted desire and economic failure" (46), thereby suggesting that characters' economic positions can be organized along a bipolar axis of desire and indifference. Michaels places Carrie's desire "inside" the logic of consumption, whereas Hurstwood's indifference in the end locates him "outside" the "walled city" of this narrative economy of desire. Hurstwood dies an indifferent death because he wants nothing, whereas Carrie goes on by a "principle of discrepancy" in which her identity is articulated and sustained in the difference between what she is and what she wants. While other critics have challenged Michaels' narrow emphasis on desire, they nevertheless replicate a similar binary formula of individual desire and naturalistic indifference in which the latter variously signifies the resistance to, or absence

of, desire.

Dreiser's naturalist theater of indifference tends to lead critics to argue that Hurstwood's position as both a subject and object in a real economy of indifference might be seen as somehow more essential or authentic or irreducible than Carrie's. Moreover, this difference allows them to make neat distinctions between a number of novelistic formations, which, in turn, can be read as analogues of economic conditions. Accordingly, many critics argue for a series of parallel distinctions between Carrie and Hurstwood, illusion and reality, economic consumption and production, and even the stylistic mix of Dreiser's "commodified language" and naturalist verity.

What does not get much attention in these critical interpretations is the role of indifference in such formulations, except for rather casual references to conventional descriptions of naturalism's propensity for rendering its characters in a universe of deterministic mechanism, impersonal force, and entropic decline. Indifference here functions as a sort of master-signifier of all that opposes individual desire or marks its absence. To some extent, this equation is useful, but it tends to result in an overdetermined representation of desire and indifference as distinct and stable oppositional identities, whereas they are more like two aspects of a single structural process. (Indeed, "indifference" is a word rather conveniently custom-built for deconstructionist play.) Throughout *Sister Carrie*, characters are variously identified and related to each other as subjects and objects of desire and indifference, which structure and sustain each other in a series of exchanges both real and imagined. Configurations of desire and indifference operate at the level of both personal drama and social narrative, and therefore significantly inform the entire fictional economy of *Sister Carrie*.

For example, Carrie's early desire to find a job takes her along a path whose contours are significantly mapped by indifference. In her first venture into the streets of Chicago, she is "conscious of being gazed upon and understood for what she was—a wage-seeker. . . . To avoid a certain indefinable shame she felt at being caught spying for a position, she quickened her steps and assumed an air of indifference supposedly common to one upon an errand" (18). Once inside the department stores,

Carrie, who is “not familiar with the appearance of her more fortunate sisters in the city,” notices that they are “pretty in the main, some even handsome, with an air of independence and indifference, which added, in the case of the more favoured, a certain piquancy” (23). Toward the end of a long first day of job-hunting, Carrie’s “fatigued senses” instill in her the notion that “the great business portion grew larger, harder, more stolid in its indifference. It seemed as if it was all closed to her” (26).

A second episode suggests a similar configuration of desire and indifference in a market of a different sort. Some time after she is established as Drouet’s mistress, Carrie goes to the theater with Drouet and Hurstwood. At the theater we watch a performance of what Dreiser refers to as “the ancient attraction of the fresh for the stale” (92). This show, however, is not on the stage, but in the box in which Carrie’s desire for Drouet diminishes as her attraction to Hurstwood rises. Carrie is “pleased beyond expression” with Hurstwood: “Several times their eyes accidentally met, and then there poured into hers such a flood of feeling as she had never before experienced. She could not for the moment explain it, for in the next glance or the next move of the hand there was seeming indifference, mingled only with the kindest attention.” Later, he takes Carrie’s “little hand” to wish her good night, and a “current of feeling” sweeps from one to the other (96-97).

In these two episodes, indifference is alternately a source of desire (that which makes you piquant), a mask for desire (that which hides your hunger), and a path along which desire arrives at satisfaction. Critics have themselves remained indifferent to Dreiser’s rather habitual use of the word “indifference,” although it appears in *Sister Carrie* so often that the attending reader might feel compelled to ask whether it is only another of Dreiser’s often-noted stylistic blemishes, an example of how Dreiser rather heavy-handedly inscribes a major theme into the novel by literally and repeatedly smuggling its own name into the text, or a usage of more provocative significance. Perhaps Dreiser’s use of “indifference” is a kind of “fault” in the text in the sense of both “defect or error” and “break or rupture,” or, alternately, an “oversight” that marks both careless mistake and watchful management. Given the considerable critical analysis

of desire in *Sister Carrie*, this closely related leitmotif in Dreiser's work deserves more attention.

I. Neoclassical Desire and Indifference

Neoclassical economic analysis, especially its marginal utility theory of consumer behavior, offers a useful model for exploring desire and indifference in *Sister Carrie*. While the novel has indeed attracted many economic readings of desire, critics have tended toward Marxist interpretations or other approaches outside the mainstream neoclassical tradition, such as Thorstein Veblen's "institutionalist" analysis of consumer capitalism.⁵ Generally, literary critics have been indifferent to neoclassical economic theory in their readings of *Sister Carrie*, although the emergence of that discourse is historically coincident with Dreiser's novel. Moreover, like *Sister Carrie*, neoclassical analysis addresses the connections between the subjective desire of the individual consumer and objective market conditions. Between the 1870s and the early years of the twentieth century, the work of neoclassical economists such as W. S. Jevons and Alfred Marshall in England, Carl Menger in Austria, Leon Walras and Vilfredo Pareto in Switzerland, and John Bates Clark in the United States marks a significant change in mainstream economic analysis. Although they were largely unaware of each other's efforts, their work suggests a kind of harmonic convergence that, depending on one's interpretive apparatus, variously looks like disciplinary breakthrough, capitalist conspiracy, or Foucauldian episteme.⁶

One important feature of the neoclassical project is that whereas classical economists generally sought to explain market prices by a theory of value based on production costs, neoclassical economists shifted their attention to individual consumption utility. Moreover, they addressed economic utility by way of "rates of exchange," in which, to put it in terms of Saussure's suggestively and historically coincidental formulation, "there are only differences, *without positive terms*."⁷ For example, Carrie's shoes would have no inherent value based solely on the objective costs of their production (such as the labor "embodied" in them). Instead, they provide

Carrie with a particular level of utility that she would assign to them according to their relative usefulness and scarcity in a system of commodities. Carrie's utility assignments are both subjective and contingent, but are nevertheless empirically revealed in her manifest consumer choices.

Neoclassical marginal utility theory argues that, while we cannot know utility in any absolute sense, we can *compare* the utility of different objects of desire in relation to one another in terms of revealed preferences and exchanges. Anticipating Dreiser's naturalistic formulation of desire, Jevons claimed in 1871 that his goal was to "treat Economy as a Calculus of Pleasure and Pain" (vi) in which a "mechanics of utility and self-interest" (21) could be rigorously constructed. Although "every mind is . . . inscrutable to every other mind, and no common denominator seems to be possible" (14), Jevons insisted that "the Laws of Exchange . . . resemble the Laws of Equilibrium of a Lever" (vii). Similarly, Pareto argued that the "theory of economic science thus acquires the rigor of rational mechanics; it deduces its results from experience, without bringing in any metaphysical entity" (113).

Neoclassical economists such as Jevons and Pareto attempted to do away with absolute values altogether by using the concept of indifference to signify desire in a system of relative differences. As Jevons put it, "if we can compare the quantities . . . we do not need the units" (12). In their analyses, indifference refers to a particular set of consumer choices in which each choice represents the same total utility. An indifference curve might depict the consumption trade-offs between shoes and jackets that give Carrie a certain level of pleasure, hence she is indifferent between any two positions on that schedule. The "shape" of his schedule or curve is determined by the rate at which she would be willing to exchange shoes for jackets, which is a function of their relative usefulness and scarcity as Carrie perceives them. An indifference map consists of a number of indifference curves (something like a topographical map), each of which depicts a certain level of utility. From this indifference map we can determine where Carrie maximizes her utility, given the constraints of prices and income.

Perhaps this short description is both too much and not

enough for economists and non-economists alike, but the main point to keep in mind is that the neoclassical model argues that because individual desire is subjective and objective conditions are variable, economic utility has meaning only in a system of relative differences. Moreover, utility is maximized where these different desires are somehow in (equimarginal) balance, by way of what Jevons called the “law of indifference.” Note that in the neoclassical model, indifference does not delineate a static or entropic state of equilibrium in which individual desire is absent, exhausted, or resisted, nor does indifference signify those material conditions of “the real” that impinge upon desire, such as the alienating effects of the capitalist market system. Instead, desire is, as it were, alive and well.

Sister Carrie resonates with much of this, although it would be difficult to argue that Carrie or any other character functions strictly like a mimetic representation of the neoclassical utility maximizer. This would be no more satisfactory than overdetermined Marxist readings. Yet the neoclassical model does provide a suggestive trope for the fictional economy of *Sister Carrie*. First, personal desire and satisfaction, as well as the social causes and consequences of those personal states, are significantly rendered in terms of economic consumption—perhaps as much as anything, Carrie is a consumer. Second, the utilities of those objects that characters desire are subjective and variable. We note, for example, that Carrie moves through a landscape significantly mapped in terms of differences, an array of commodities, people, and social positions whose identities she knows and values in terms of their relative positions. Just as her ideas about clothing styles, furnishings, and restaurants keep evolving as one observation and experience replaces another, so too does she tend to assign value to Drouet, Hurstwood, and Ames in relation to one another. Third, Carrie repeatedly makes these trade-offs in terms of the conventional economic utility function, in which the “diminishing returns” of various objects, people, places, and predicaments delineate her narrative path. This is what is referred to early in the novel as “the ancient attraction of the fresh for the stale” (92). Fourth, Carrie engages in some utilitarian cost-benefit analysis of her decisions, such as when she weighs the ethical costs against the economic gains of

her association with Drouet, or in shopping sprees in which she is in the “delightful . . . middle state in which we mentally balance at times, possessed of the means, lured by desire, and yet deterred by conscience or want of decision” (61). Moreover, Dreiser make such predicaments interpersonal in ways that resemble Jevons’ notion of the “laws of equilibrium of a lever”:

“Oh,” thought Drouet, “how delicious is my conquest.”

“Ah,” thought Carrie, with mournful misgivings, “what is it I have lost?” (81)

II. Indifference and the Conduct of Desire

Indifference is cast too variously by Dreiser to be read as a determined trope of naturalistic force. Instead, throughout the novel indifference is both personal and impersonal, desired and dreaded, and imagined as real and represented as artificial. Indifference organizes characters as both subjects and objects, functions dramatically within scenes, and organizes structural and dynamic exchanges between them. A more extensive survey of indifference in the novel amplifies these key points.

Carrie’s introduction to Chicago begins with her sense that for her brother-in-law Hanson, she is “a matter of indifference” (13), which isolates Carrie and compels her movement away from the household. So, while indifference has an alienating effect on Carrie, this alienation is nevertheless a kind of dramatic engine that drives her out of the domestic sphere and into the economic marketplace. On the other hand, indifference is neither solely personal nor entirely “real,” as is suggested in the examples of her initial job search and trip to the theater with Hurstwood. Similarly, in one of his earliest and most effective declarations of affection for Carrie, Hurstwood says to her,

“You think . . . I am happy . . . ? If you were to meet all day with people who care absolutely nothing about you, if you went day after day to a place where there was nothing but show and indifference, if there was not one person . . . to whom you could appeal for sympathy or talk to with pleasure, perhaps you

would be unhappy too.” (111)

In this instance, Hurstwood’s reference to indifference, like Dreiser’s usage more generally, is ambiguous in at least three ways. First, it is not clear here whether indifference is a kind of performance in apposition to “show,” or is instead some “real” condition that delineates the production of such an illusion. Second, the business of indifference, which Hurstwood claims is grinding him down, is nevertheless a condition of his success as a manager of a public establishment insofar as he has to maintain a certain social persona. Finally, his depiction of the “public” indifference does “personal” work in the scene, for it functions as an attractor between him and Carrie.

This attraction between Hurstwood and Carrie parallels the growing “river of indifference” (120) between Hurstwood and his wife, as well as within the Hurstwood household more generally. When Mrs. Hurstwood insists upon being given the “Waukesha money,” she “turned upon [Hurstwood], animal-like, able to strike” and he looks at her “in amazement. Never before had he seen such a cold, steely determination in her eye—such a look of indifference” (182). Here again Dreiser either strains the usage of the word (conflating determination and indifference) or implies that the indifference is merely a mask—a kind of theatrical show intended to have a desired effect. Similarly, Carrie’s encounters with other women in her first job search is replicated in the description of Hurstwood’s daughter Jessica, who is characterized by her “cynical indifference,” and whose “independence and indifference” is studiously asserted “with a toss of her head and a flick of her pretty skirts” (175).

This suggests how configurations of indifference and desire not only operate *within* scenes, but also organize the relationship *between* them, especially in terms of the patterns of repetition and transformation in the forward-moving narrative. For example, when Carrie leaves Drouet and retraces her steps in order to look for work again, she notices a difference: “She knew that she had improved in appearance. . . . [M]en . . . who before had gazed at her indifferently from behind their polished railings and imposing office partitions—now gazed into her face with a soft light in their eyes. . . . [S]he felt the power and satisfaction of the thing” (206). In this instance, Carrie conveys rather than en-

counters indifference, marking a shift in power; she is, as it were, a producer rather than a consumer of indifference. The economy of desire and indifference within the earlier episode is replicated in a narrative structure by which the *différance* of indifference, we might say, narrates Carrie's progress. Similarly, when Carrie later ventures out into the theater world of New York, indifference shapes the exchange much as it does her first job search: "At the Empire Theatre she found a hive of peculiarly listless and indifferent individuals" (316), and in an interview she "tried to be calm and indifferent, but it was a palpable sham" (318). Once she becomes a successful star, however, she "smiled to think that men should suddenly find her so much more attractive. In the least way it incited her to coolness and indifference" (379).

Likewise, in her attraction to Ames, Carrie replicates her earlier attraction to Drouet and Hurstwood, in which indifference circulates as cause and effect of desire, both of which are ambiguously real and artificial. Carrie finds that Ames "reminded her of scenes she had seen on the stage" and that he "had taken away some of the bitterness of the contrast between this life and her life, and all by a certain calm indifference which concerned only him." This is, she thinks, quite different from the "feigned indifference" she projects at their parting (272). She later attempts to "get" some of this "better" indifference by reading the naturalist novel that Ames has recommended to her (Balzac's *Père Goriot*).

Even so, there is no getting "outside" Dreiser's fictional economy of the production and consumption of indifference, for in the last "real" scene with Carrie, she is in her "comfortable chambers at the Waldorf . . . reading at this time 'Père Goriot'" (411). Shamed by her earlier readings as "silly and worthless" fictional representations, she "nearly caught the full sympathetic significance" of Balzac's naturalist story. "Becoming wearied, however, she yawned and came to the window, looking out upon the old winding procession of carriages rolling up Fifth Avenue" (411). Carrie substitutes the spectacle of the window for the naturalist picture in Balzac's novel, yet both result in a similar indifference. As they watch the storm outside, Carrie chides her friend Lola for her indifference to-

ward those who have nothing, yet Carrie is herself indifferent to Lola's observation at the sight of some "sheepish" man falling in the snow, for Carrie is thinking "absently" now of their need for a coach. At the end, Carrie finds that what were "once far off, essential things" such as money, fame, and beauty have "grown trivial and indifferent" (416), Dreiser's final, awkward use of the word that entirely conflates subjects and objects in a matrix of indifference. Like Carrie's famous theatrical pout, Dreiserian indifference carries the show.

Even Hurstwood's indifference and the indifference he encounters, both of which are a function of his economic decline, underscore how the production and consumption of desire and indifference all circulate in the same fictional economy. This is evident, for example, in the specular relations among characters inside and outside of restaurants. When Drouet and Carrie go to eat at the Windsor, Drouet selects a table "close by the window, where the busy route of the street could be seen. He loved the changing panorama of the street—to see and be seen as he dined" (53). Similarly, when Carrie goes to Sherry's with the Vances and Ames (Hurstwood, indifferent, stays home), the sense of being "inside" is produced in part by the memory of having been "outside":

In all Carrie's experience she had never seen anything like this. . . . Carrie had read of it often She had seen notices . . . [which] had given her a distinct idea of the gorgeousness and luxury of this wonderful temple Now, at last, she was really in it. . . . Here was the splendid dining-chamber, all decorated and aglow Vance led the way through lanes of shining tables Incandescent lights, the reflection of their glow in polished glasses, and the shine of gilt upon the walls, combined into one tone of light which it requires minutes of complacent observation to separate and take note of. (267-268)

Later, Hurstwood occupies the position of outsider looking in with a very different sort of "complacent observation." When he is on his last walk through the city, starving, cold, and suicidal,

he paused in an aimless, incoherent way and looked

through the windows of an imposing restaurant, before which blazed a fire sign, and through the large, plate windows of which could be seen the red and gold decorations, the palms, the white napery, and shining glassware, and above all, the comfortable crowd. Weak as his mind had become, his hunger was sharp enough to show the importance of this. He stopped stock still, his frayed trousers soaking in the slush, and peered foolishly in. "Eat," he mumbled. "That's right, eat. Nobody else wants any." (410)

Desire and indifference circulate within and between restaurant scenes to constitute the characters' predicaments *and* Dreiser's strategy for representing them.

Hurstwood's position in this configuration of indifference completes the stagecraft of desire. Just as desire and indifference are intricately connected in this novel, the realms of production and consumption cannot be easily distinguished, nor can the respective terms in either of these pairs of concepts be conveniently aligned with any set of novelistic formations.⁸

The absence of any reference to neoclassical theory in economic readings of *Sister Carrie* is unfortunate, given the historical correspondence between neoclassical economics and naturalism, as well as the similarities between neoclassical analysis and the economic issues that critics observe in the novel, especially the curious coincidence between neoclassical and poststructuralist configurations of desire. However we might want to speculate on such critical indifference, the "coincidence of wants" between neoclassical economics, *Sister Carrie*, and its critical reception speaks to Fredric Jameson's Marxist insistence to "always historicize," for there has occurred a kind of critical forgetting which is in need of being remembered and remedied.

Notes

¹ In his first encounter with Carrie, Drouet is described as both a "drummer" and a "masher" whose "dress and manners" link his performance as a salesman to his amorous appeal for Carrie (7). Drouet's skills as a salesman are initially described in terms of his exchanges

with women in places of business such as department stores in which the “sale” involves not merchandise but sexual conquest, for Drouet’s mind is “actuated not by greed, but an insatiable love of variable pleasure. His method was always simple. Its principal element was daring, backed, of course, by an intense desire and admiration for the sex” (8).

² Many critics have sought to interpret Dreiser’s depiction of desire in consumer capitalism by coupling poststructuralist equations of desire with a variety of economic concepts and critiques. These economic readings tend to propose some link involving poststructuralist configurations of identity and difference, Dreiser’s strategies of representation, and the conditions of consumer capitalism. See, for example, Michaels 29-58. This essay is perhaps one of the more familiar contemporary readings of the novel; moreover, as an instance of New Historicist criticism, it is indicative of a broad set of interpretations that have linked poststructuralist and economic concerns.

³ Most readings of *Sister Carrie* at least note this configuration. The novelistic structure is typically linked to Herbert Spencer’s concept of equilibrium, which is said to have influenced Dreiser’s naturalistic representation of economic conditions. For more extensive analysis of Spencer’s influence on Dreiser, see Martin, Katope, and Zanine.

⁴ Fredric Jameson, for example, has argued for a connection between capitalist conditions and Dreiser’s modernist “construction of the subject” as “a closed monad,” in which the technique of point of view reifies desire as “merely psychological experience, private feeling, or relativized value” (160). Jameson also gives a Marxist interpretation of the often-noted “difficulties” of Dreiser’s style, arguing that the “paradox about Dreiser—he is best at his worst—is peculiarly intensified by the problem of his style, which must be studied in terms of alienation and reification” (159), for “*style* in Dreiser [is] a strange and alien bodily speech . . . interwoven with the linguistic junk of commodified language” (160-161). Accordingly, “the tawdriness of Carrie’s hunger for trinkets [is] a tawdriness that Dreiser’s language ambiguously represents and reflects all at once” (159). Sandy Petrey finds similar examples of commodification and “false consciousness” in Dreiser’s use of melodramatic and sentimental language, which Petrey links to capitalist mass-media forms, such as popular songs.

⁵ Michaels, Jameson, and Petrey all use Marxist theory extensively. For a good example of an economic reading making use of Veblen, see Eby.

⁶ As many historians of economic thought point out, this attention to utility and value was by no means without precedent. Mentioning other Continental economists such as Quesney, Beccaria, Turgot, and Bernoulli, Joseph Schumpeter argues that this strain of analysis “had

wind until the influence of [Adam Smith's] *Wealth of Nations*—and especially Ricardo's *Principles*—asserted itself" (300-302). For related discussions of the psychology of desire, modern subjectivity, and economic utility, see Foucault 166-216 and Goux.

⁷ In *Course in General Linguistics* Saussure points to his neoclassical contemporaries in economics as an example to be emulated by linguists (79). One interesting historical caveat is the evidence of contact between Saussure and the neoclassical economists Walras and Pareto, such as can be found in Julien Freund's argument that Walras's protégé Vilfredo Pareto maintained "excellent relations" with Saussure and that Pareto's references to connections between linguistics and sociology can be partly explained in terms of his friendship with Saussure (27-28).

⁸ While this claim might seem close to Walter Benn Michaels', I am arguing for at least two crucial differences: First, Hurstwood's indifference is not in my view a binary opposite to Carrie's desire; in Michaels' argument (like many Marxist readings), the former is aligned with a whole set of psychological, economic, and social formations, which, he claims, are imagined in the fiction as impossible states to represent or sustain, hence naturalism's complicity with consumer capitalism. My argument attempts to bring indifference into the economy of desire, which challenges both Marxist readings and Michaels' New Historicist turn of the screw. Second, Michaels goes to great lengths to map out a number of poststructuralist evocations of economic theories of value in order to set up his critical equation of desire and difference, yet he pays no attention to neoclassical utility theory, the result being, I think, a forced application of Marxist theory and a misreading of the fiction.

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“Whom the Gods Would Destroy”: “Pagan” Identity and Sexuality in *The “Genius”*

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Though it remained unpublished until 1915, Theodore Dreiser completed his manuscript draft of *The “Genius”* in 1911, making it the first of his major works to feature a male protagonist. Critics have found various ways of formulating the struggles of the main character, Eugene Witla. Philip Gerber divines the novel’s overall theme as “the conflict between artistic dedication and the carnivorous distractions of the unbridled sex drive and of materialism” (112). Richard Lehan claims the novel shows that “the desire for money and sex had their common source in the desire for power” and adds “artistic recognition” as one of the three desires that “become the primary reasons for living” (119). Lawrence E. Hussman, Jr., provides a detailed analysis of Witla’s sexuality and places it on equal footing with religion in the novel. So of four major concerns located in *The “Genius”*—art, materialism (including money and fame), religion, and sexuality—the latter has drawn more than its share of critical attention. Indeed, as the attempted banning of the novel in 1916 by the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice¹ demonstrates, “lewdness and profanity” have always been the defining points of interest in the book.

It takes but little speculation to decide why this is so. Sexuality—not only desire for sex but the aspects of one’s identity shaped by that desire—in Dreiser’s ideological view, stands opposed to culture. Like heredity, it belongs to the realm of biology—to the ineffable realm of Force, to use Frank Norris’ term. Though sexuality becomes subject to the mores and confinements of society, it often cannot be contained in such ways and stands as a major countering agent, as hinted at by books like *Sister Carrie* (1900) and *Jennie Gerhardt* (1911). In Dreiser’s autobiographical novel this central conflict of human

existence was to be more explicit than ever.

[Witla] was frank, genial, considerate, not willing to condemn anyone—but this sex question—that was where he was weak. And was not the whole world keyed to that? Did not the decencies and the sanities of life depend on right moral conduct? Was not the world dependent on how the homes were run? How could anyone be good if his mother and father had not been good before him? How could the children of the world expect to be anything if people rushed here and there holding illicit relations? (*“Genius”* 181).

To further complicate matters, the passage reveals the complex associations of sexuality beyond the merely biological: it is mixed up with morality and the future of the human race. Witla wonders if his proclivity for sexual activity is not a weakness and a failure to assume a positive role in society.

For Dreiser, then, sexuality is one of those primal forces which manipulates human beings and conflicts with their will and with culturally enforced learned behavior. And as usual, Dreiser presents forces in terms of dualism. In its unchecked, more natural state, he conceives of sexuality as “pagan.”² In its more repressed, controlled form, he associates it with modernity, society, even Christianity. Predictably, then, Witla’s sexual adventures and the women who share them are represented dualistically: by approach and withdrawal, commitment and guilt, lust and love, freedom and responsibility, art and philistinism, power and impotence. I will discuss how those women who promise the former qualities are associated clearly with paganism, those who threaten the latter with Christianity. This will lead to examination of the dual narrative modes of *The “Genius,”* in which I propose that Dreiser coordinates a sort of straightforward *bildungsroman* with protagonist as hero against a parody of the same model. In other words, the protagonist occupies the roles of exemplar and fool simultaneously.

Dreiser renders the novel’s discourse of gender and sexuality substantially in terms of modern/Christian versus “pagan” values. We shall return to the intricacies of paganism for Dreiser in a moment, because it is simpler first to delineate those notions he definitely opposes it to: conventionality, monogamy, repression,

unthinking piety. The narrator's final word on Witla himself is that he is an artist, "pagan to the core" ("*Genius*" 734). Of course, recognizing the ironic process used on Witla and the sad denouement of his career necessitates a more complex notion of "paganism" which cannot be unqualifiedly positive. It would seem to represent the antithesis of the above qualities; however, what Witla fails to realize (but I propose Dreiser does realize) is that so-called pagan cultures had all manner of convention and repression of their own. A mature appreciation of the values of culture transmitted through literature, known as *mythos*, led Dreiser to such a realization, but Witla has read far less carefully.

To begin with, Witla and his women conceive of themselves and each other as either pagans or moderns/Christians, with each nursing the attendant notion that what he/she is must be "right" or superior. Witla's wife most completely represents the Christian:

Angela's mental and emotional composition was stable. She had learned to believe from childhood that marriage was a fixed thing. She believed in one life and one love. When you found that, every other relationship which did not minister to it was ended. If children came, very good; if not, very good; marriage was permanent anyhow. And if you did not marry happily it was nevertheless your duty to endure and suffer for whatever good might remain. You might suffer badly in such a union, but it was dangerous and disgraceful to break it. If you could not stand it any more, your life was a failure. ("*Genius*" 82)

Through the strict sense of duty, monogamy, and resignation to suffering expressed here, Witla's wife is relentlessly associated throughout the novel with Christianity; Angela has "a face that, in the ordinary lines of its repose, was very much like that of a madonna" ("*Genius*" 258). Critics drawing parallels between the novel and its author's biography have noted that Angela *Blue* was certainly based on Dreiser's first wife, Sara *White*—I emphasize the shift in name/color because together they signal the colors of Mary, mother of Christ. Angela's conflicts with

Witla often follow both the "mothering" and the "Mary" patterns. She repeatedly forgives his sexual roving, hoping "it might be that he would not sin against her any more" (*"Genius"* 268). Eventually, though he respects the religious beliefs that Angel(a) has inherited from her pious father, his attempts to openly break with her manifest his resistance to the religion he associates with her: "You imagine that in some way you have been appointed by God to be my mentor and guardian. Well, I tell you now that you haven't" (*"Genius"* 571-2).

Angela reinforces the novel's association of Witla's mistresses with paganism and, by extension, the prelapsarian world of nature.³ As she discovers one of her husband's affairs, her thoughts reflect the prevalent idea that Christian myth subsumes older models: "A love note! From some demon of a woman. No doubt of it! Some mysterious woman in the background. 'Ashes of Roses!' Now God curse her for a siren, a love thief, a hypnotizing snake, fascinating men with her evil eyes" (*"Genius"* 372). As she confronts Witla with his crime of adultery, she also indicates the hierarchy of God, man, and animal: "Yes, I know where you've been. You've been out again with that miserable beast of a woman. Oh, God will punish her yet! You will be punished! Wait and see" (*"Genius"* 391).

Angela does indeed see herself, as Witla charges, as his moral and spiritual guardian.⁴ Though she recognizes that the responsibility for his crimes is his to bear, she longs to aid in an imagined redemption. She wonders that

She couldn't have been expected to shut out all young women from Eugene's life. No; it was Eugene. It was his attitude toward life. His craze about the beautiful, particularly in women. She could see it now. He really was not strong enough. Beauty would always upset him at critical moments. She had seen it in relation to herself—the beauty of her form, which he admired so, or had admired. "God," she prayed silently, "give me wisdom now. Give me strength. I don't deserve it, but help me. Help me to save him. Help me to save myself." (*"Genius"* 578)

Meanwhile, Witla disdains her aid, seeking only release from a

marriage entered into through a mistaken sense of duty. He gradually becomes repelled by his life-partner, and only in rare moments when he can disassociate her from her usual personality does she enjoy anything like his old regard. Once, the “an ache went with her which brought a memory of the tales of Sappho” (“*Genius*” 145), but no more. But when she threatens to kill both him and one of his lovers, “Eugene was astounded. He had never seen such rage in any woman. It was wonderful, fascinating, something like a great lightning-riven storm. Angela was capable of hurling thunderbolts of wrath. He had not known that. It raised her in his estimation—made her really more attractive than she would otherwise have been, for power, however displayed, is fascinating” (“*Genius*” 384-5). When she cannot sustain this Zeus-like wrath, however, he again reviles her.

Women who more consistently meet the hero’s conceptions of pagan attitude and conduct find his affection more ardent, if not enduring. Miriam Finch (nature again) epitomizes “the sanest, cleanest understanding . . . he had yet reached with any woman.” “Her ideal of a lover had been fixed to a certain extent by statues and poems of Greek youth—Hylas, Adonis, Perseus” (“*Genius*” 143-4). As for her appearance, “her lips were sweetly modelled after the pattern of a Cupid’s bow” (“*Genius*” 137). Christina (the apparent association with “Christ” notwithstanding) Channing, a woman artist and Witla’s “wood nymph” (“*Genius*” 164), accepts openly the fact that he will tire of her and they will part after sexual attraction has dissipated. “Take what the gods provide and have no regrets,” she advises him (“*Genius*” 161). The letter Angela later discovers from Christina to Witla runs thus:

“I went this morning to see if by chance there were any tell-tale evidences of either Diana or Adonis in Arcady. There were none of importance. A hair-pin or two, a broken mother-of-pearl button from a summer waist, the stub of a lead-pencil wherewith a certain genius sketched. The trees seemed just as unconscious of any nymphs or hamadryads as they could be. The smooth grass was quite unruffled of any feet. It is strange how much the trees and forest know and keep their counsel.

And how is the hot city by now? Do you miss a
certain evenly-swung hammock? Oh, the odor of
leaves and the dew! . . . I send you good wishes—
Diana." (*"Genius"* 256)

Christina's privileging of nature over the trappings of civilization associated with Angela nearly captures Witla's full devotion, but others await their turn and Christina goes her way. The genius meets Frieda Roth, "sunning her hair on the back porch after she had washed it and she came down to stand under the trees near the water, looking like a naiad" (*"Genius"* 280). He also enjoys sexual relations in her own parents' house with Carlotta Hibberdell, who faces their discovery "not without the dignity of a Circe" (*"Genius"* 352).

Witla's most fervent pursuit is reserved for Suzanne Dale (the association with nature is double edged, since a dale or valley is a geographical low point). Both Angela and Witla conceive of Suzanne in terms of the goddess who kept Odysseus from his wife for an extra year: "This girl, this foolish, silly, selfish girl, with her Circe gift of beauty, by tolerance of his suit, by yielding, perhaps by throwing herself at Eugene's head, had done this thing" (*"Genius"* 572); "'Oh, you divinity!' he exclaimed. 'Helen! Circe!'" (*"Genius"* 586). Helen, perhaps the most famous adulteress in history, was also alternately invoked as a goddess and cursed for the losses of the Trojan War by men in antiquity.

Witla's infatuation with Suzanne reaches such heights that he becomes willing to discuss his attraction to her openly with Angela. He makes overt comparisons: "She loves me, she's willing to take me just as I am. She doesn't need marriage ceremonies and rings and vows and chains. She doesn't believe in them. As long as I love her, all right. When I cease to love her, she doesn't want me any more. Some difference in that, isn't there?" (*"Genius"* 576). Not since *Sister Carrie* have we seen such mutual agreement to the "kept woman" arrangement: "'When we get our studio,' he said, 'we'll furnish it perfectly, and entertain a little after a while, maybe. You'll be my lovely Suzanne, my Flower Face, my Myrtle Blossom. Helen, Circe, Dianeme.' 'I'll be your week-end bride,' she laughed, 'your odd or even girl, whichever way the days fall'" (*"Genius"* 597).

And not since *Jennie Gerhardt* have two characters of Dreiser's so brazenly flaunted society's domestic conventions.

The "Genius" was composed during the period of Dreiser's most prolific use of mythic paradigms which reached its apex with 1914's *The Titan*. The large number of direct mythical allusions in *The "Genius"* attest that the author had more in mind for the work than the self-vindication for a failed marriage that Ellen Moers claims (212). I believe he was trying (perhaps unconsciously) to meet the challenge posed to American literature since its inception: the creation of a distinct American mythology, a unique means of engaging the mysteries of life—while paying homage to classical models, its expressions would ultimately be its own. The title of his masterpiece, *An American Tragedy*, far from the pomposity some have attached to it, would mark a culmination of this effort.

When Dreiser decided to add the quotation marks to the title of *The "Genius,"* he did much more than take another step toward self-reflexivity as an artist or, as a letter to Mencken notes, distinguish his novel from another of the same title. He served notice to the world that, despite the fact that his major works were often read as containing their own interpretive keys in the form of monolithic narrators commenting on the action and inner workings of character, his work was open to ironic scrutiny and multiplicity of interpretations.⁵ If Eugene Witla saw himself as occupying privileged status in society, as better than other men, like Frank Cowperwood before him, Dreiser aided readers in rejecting that self-serving view: "He was an artist. The common laws of existence could not reasonably apply to an artist. The latter should have intellectual freedom, the privilege of going where he pleased, associating with whom he chose. This marriage business was a galling yoke, cutting all rational opportunity for enjoyment. . ." (*"Genius"* 365).

The novel has been called autobiographical or semi-autobiographical so often that the claim has taken on the power of literary-historical fact. Establishing this claim has been done effectively by others,⁶ and if we can continue to accept it, then the process of self-ironizing which *The "Genius"* forcibly exhibits makes Dreiser's accomplishment all the more remarkable. Far from the traditional portrait of Dreiser as a

narcissistic, marginal writer with an overblown sense of wonder at his own pseudo-philosophical prose, this essay embraces a different vision: Dreiser's sense of wonder at life was sincere enough that he opened his fictional representation of himself in Eugene Witla to mockery as well as sympathy.

Not all critics have accepted such distancing of the author from his work. Lehan claims that, in opposing the world of art to the world of convention, Dreiser erected a black/white, hero/villain dichotomy, and that "such extremes destroy ambiguity: Eugene is too good for the world that contains him; he is Dreiser's innocent man in a corrupt world. As a result, *The "Genius"* totally lacks irony" (127). By failing to provide credible alternatives to Eugene's view, Lehan explains, Dreiser refuses to create a double view (128). This reading, echoed by Dreiser's most recent biographer, Richard Lingeman (122-23), reflects the familiar position that Witla partakes too much of Dreiser himself to reflect a perspective which admits irony.

While other critics have agreed that the novel is marred by Dreiser's lack of "a point of perspective from which real events might be assimilated into his larger experience and contemplated somewhat dispassionately" (Gerber 111), they have allowed room for a self-ironizing process. Gerber compares Witla to the rider of Poe's poem "Eldorado," who "believe[s] ever . . . in the ultimate fulfillment of the mirage" (114). Hussman takes a more positive stance, locating a "certain satiric element in Dreiser's treatment of Eugene's chaotic emotional makeup": "Dreiser knows from the outset that Eugene's dream [of finding the perfect woman] is doomed. He advises the reader that although Eugene does not realize it, he is investing the girls he meets with 'more beauty than they had' and that 'the beauty was in his own soul'" (*Quest* 93).

My own position is that Dreiser's narratives contain enough internal tension to be considered at least double-layered: the narrative voice (which often conflicts with itself) exists in general friction with the actual events orchestrated by the author, thereby problematizing any easy access to theme the reader might otherwise find. However, this need not be a flaw in a literary work. As the consummate artist of Dreiser's canon, Witla comes closest to fulfilling anything like a heroic ideal: the

narrator of *The "Genius"* thus promotes Dreiser's own profession while seeming to lionize the protagonist. However, as a *bildungsroman* the novel deals with growth and education, and thereby must spend considerable energy dramatizing Witla's shortcomings. Thus the "novel of education" functions in the double sense: while exhibiting the developing career of its own lead character, it schools the reader in the ideals and limitations of the code followed by that character. By such a process the author is able to practice didacticism while entertaining; thesis and antithesis (straight lessons in heroism reinforced by violation and punishment for transgressions) synthesize into a coherent whole.

Thus Witla (whose name suggests both wit and witlessness) is what has become known as a modern hero, no paragon, one whose estimable qualities are balanced by deep flaws, who can be admired and despised simultaneously. Joyce's Stephen Dedalus provides the best known modern example of the type, and his name suggests its dual, Christian/pagan origins.⁷ The name of Dreiser's hero, too, is not without artistic and mythic suggestiveness: "Eugene," which shares its etymology with words like "engender," "genesis," and of course "genius," derives from the Greek *genes*, born. His middle name is Tennyson, the poet laureate famed for his treatments of myth and who revised the fate of Homer's hero Odysseus for a modern audience.

As for Homer's own treatment of the last man to return alive from the sack of Troy, classicists have long noticed the disjunctive crux between the singer (narrator) of the epic's often unqualified praise of Odysseus and the Odysseus we actually see. Since Dreiser was so well-read in the classics, I would argue that the double narrative of *The "Genius"* reflects direct modeling on Homer. Albrecht Dihle chooses one of the most brutal yet beautiful passages in antiquity to illustrate the poet's ironic distance from his subject:

And Odysseus
let the bright molten tears run down his cheeks,
weeping the way a wife mourns for her lord
on the lost field where he has gone down fighting
the day of wrath that came upon his children.

At the sight of the man panting and dying there,
she slips down to enfold him, crying out;
then feels the spears, prodding her back and shoulders,
and goes bound into slavery and grief.
Piteous weeping wears away her cheeks:
But no more piteous than Odysseus’ tears,
cloaked as they were, now, from the company.
(*Od.* VIII. 560-71)

Dihle explains that the simile used here is one way Homer openly criticizes the ideals of the heroic world. The poet puts the hero on the same level as the victims of his own epic deeds (Dihle 20). The passage also makes an intertextual bow to *The Iliad*, in which women are regularly treated as vessels of *kleos* (everlasting fame), on a level with cattle or other forms of booty. The comparison of Odysseus to such a woman is especially jarring, undercutting the status of his heroism along with his seemingly impregnable gender identity. *The Odyssey* thus paves the way for narratives whose highest ideals are often subverted through imagery, event, and commentary.

In addition to a complex narrative paradigm, Dreiser may have found the root of Witla’s sexual attitudes in *The Odyssey*. Odysseus’ journey home takes ten years, and, though Homer gives each episode more or less equal time, it seems notable that eight of those years are consumed by obstacles involving women.

[Calypso] went to find Odysseus
in his stone seat to seaward—tear on tear
brimming his eyes. The sweet days of his life time
were running out in anguish over his exile,
for long ago the nymph had ceased to please.
Though he fought shy of her and her desire,
he lay with her each night, for she compelled him.
(*Od.* V. 157-63)

No details of the form of compulsion are forthcoming from our poet, nor are we told how vigorously our hero “fights shy” of Calypso’s sexual advances. Clearly, though, sexuality is equated with god-like power here, as I have argued Dreiser treated it.

In addition to Calypso, the epic places the witch-goddess Circe in Odysseus’ path. Not without divine intervention from

Hermes (whose totem was the phallic Herm) and his gift of *moly* can the hero escape her power. Hermes' advice includes an admonition that the hero must sleep with Circe: unless Odysseus proves his manhood through intercourse, he will be transformed into a beast like his crewmen. The implication is that sexual dominance is a basic requirement of manhood.

Nary a hint that Odysseus ought to be faithful to his long-suffering wife appears in the entire poem. By stark contrast, she meets that expectation from all quarters. Even in the Underworld, after the shades of her slain suitors arrive and report their fatal battle with Odysseus, Agamemnon's ghost contrasts Penelope with his own faithless wife:

O fortunate Odysseus, master mariner
and soldier, blessed son of old Laertes!
The girl you brought home made a valiant wife!
True to her husband's honor and her own,
Penelope, Ikarios' faithful daughter!
(*Od.* XXIV. 216-20)

Apparently, *The Odyssey* seems to tell us, only goddesses retain any degree of sexual freedom (and qualified by superior powers at that, as Calypso's complaints to Hermes about the double standards of the gods in Book V testifies.) Mortal women must somehow control their sexual urges, even at their peril. Odysseus' son Telemachus, as part of his initiation into manhood, is instructed by his father to slay the housemaids who have betrayed Odysseus by sleeping with the suitors in his absence. He tells them, "I would not give the clean death of a beast/to bulls who made a mockery of my mother/and of me too—you sluts, who lay with suitors" (*Od.* XXII. 514-16). Instead of butchery by sword, Telemachus' last significant act is to modify his father's instructions concerning the girls by hanging them: "They would be hung like doves or larks in springes triggered in a thicket" (*Od.* XXII. S20). These attractively "pagan" lessons of sexual dominance to the point of violence, womanly fidelity, and male freedom are selectively learned by Dreiser's protagonist in his growth as a "hero." Like Odysseus', Witla's adventures are interspersed with sexual episodes.⁸ However, Odysseus is protected from Penelope's possible reprisals by physical distance and a rigid double

standard, whereas Witla must add his own wife to a long list of obstacles. Witla attempts to adopt the pagan double standard and seeks out women who will accept it, never seeming to realize the extent of its outmodedness and unacceptability in the modern world. Thus he violates a basic Greek tenet of successful living: he doesn't "know his place."

The true destiny Witla imagines for himself, that of great American artist—"If he could paint something which would be purchased by the Metropolitan Museum in New York he would then be somewhat of a classic figure, ranking with . . . the leading artistic figures of his pantheon" (*"Genius"* 223)—is constantly subordinated by more worldly concerns. Eventually Witla's talent is recognized and he begins his climb through various art agencies, each commodifying his ideas, commercializing his talent, paying him ever-increasing salaries and enforcing his involvement in the social distractions of the city. Through these means, the "genius" finds himself embroiled in secret love affairs, his energy severely divided between illicit relationships and spiritually unremunerative work, while he pacifies himself and his wife in material luxury. Soon the recurring thought of returning to his pure art for its own sake comes to seem impossible. Angela wonders, "Art was glorious, but would they have as many rides and auto trips as they had now? Would she be able to dress as nicely? It took money to produce a variety of clothing—house, street, evening, morning and other wear. Hats at thirty-five and forty dollars were not in the range of artists' wives, as a rule. Did she want to go back to a simpler life for his art's sake?" (*"Genius"* 462). As with Odysseus, initially unadulterated goals become lost in the journey, and only through a violent *agon* does anything like a return become possible.

Though there are hints that Witla's fall might strictly follow the Odyssean paradigm, coming through "vainglory"—for example, one boss, Colfax, is troubled by "Eugene's early ascendancy" and "airs," and "wanted no other gods in the place beside himself" (*"Genius"* 537)—Dreiser shifts the source of his hero's fall to the more culturally pertinent taboo of sexuality. Witla becomes so incensed under the perceived bonds of his marriage, which blocks his social aspirations as well as the

convenient pursuit of throngs of young women, that he loses any remaining objectivity. As Hussman points out, Witla's successive affairs gradually build a sense of grandiose idealization of women within him which is contrasted to the impoverished vision of his aging wife. Hussman's summary of the pinnacle of Witla's ideal is worth repeating:

These expectations, defined over the course of the novel, require a woman who is physically beautiful, perpetually eighteen yet experienced and worldly wise, passionate but virginal, sensuous though innocent, intellectual but less so than her lover, coolly aloof yet extroverted and vivacious, married to him while he remains single, unswervingly loyal to him when he is disloyal to her, independent except in her subservience to him, appreciative of music and the arts, sensitive, tender, companionable, humorous, a lover of the outdoors, sympathetic, good-natured, discriminating, motherly, well-bred, socially prominent and possessed of a large wardrobe of white clothing! (*Quest* 100)

One can see in this description the strong sense of Dreiser's "satirizing" of his own autobiographically based hero that Hussman perceives in the work. For the most part though, as Hussman's collation suggests, Dreiser lets events and attitudes provide the satire rather than use the narrator to comment directly, with the occasional exception or merger of techniques. For instance, Witla reacts with a hysterical tirade to Angela's revelation that she might be pregnant: "He was like a young horse that had broken rein and that thinks that by rearing and plunging he shall become forever free. He was thinking of green fields and delightful pastures" (*"Genius"* 575). Unlike the reserved and canny Odysseus, Witla openly rejects any interference with his plans; he sees only the freedom of "paganism" and none of its restrictions. Angela is dumbfounded by the violent alteration of his character, and typically equates his evasion of her schemes with devilry: "Here he was a raging demon almost, possessed of an evil spirit of desire" (*"Genius"* 577).

Dreiser manipulates the language of his characters so as to

expose the true nature of Witla's transformation: the sense of impending possession of his ideal woman, Suzanne Dale, has unbalanced his reason. Since antiquity a cardinal male virtue has always been reason, and the shift is foreboding. Though his secret wooing of her is nearly successful, Suzanne's mother attempts to block the affair by threats of exposure to Witla's current boss. Again he falls into a violent diatribe when confronted with the possible derailment of his carefully cultivated fantasies. He tells Mrs. Dale, "My life from the point of view of affection has been a failure. I have never really been in love before, but I am crazy about Suzanne Dale. I am wild about her" ("*Genius*" 618), and he insists that "The Gods have given [Suzanne] to me, and I will have her if I have to smash you and your home and myself and everyone else connected with me. I'll have her! I'll have her! She is mine! She is mine!" Mrs. Dale reacts by wondering, "Was he crazy? Was he really so much in love? Had Suzanne turned his brain?" ("*Genius*" 619).

Through bravado, surprise, and subterfuge, as well as Suzanne's strong reciprocal infatuation, Witla presses his suit even after her mother spirits the girl off to Canada. As he approaches their cabin after having treated with the hydra-like Mrs. Dale once more, he imagines his epic destiny complete: "Life recognized him as a genius—the fates—it was heaping posies in his lap, laying a crown of victory upon his brow. . . . [Suzanne] looked all Eugene had ever thought her. Hebe—a young Diana, a Venus at nineteen" ("*Genius*" 654)

However, the hero fails to bring about the idealized climax. The age-old admonition to "know his place" cannot be adhered to if he is to ascend the pedestal on which his loved one now resides. Just as he reunites with Suzanne, caution and reason assert themselves and he ponders with her a means of compromise, of how to retain his social and financial positions while having her too. This is classical *hubris*—wanting too much, feeling that one deserves more than one's fair share. Suzanne senses the gravity of the error:

Instead of at once outlining an open or secret scheme
of escape, or taking her by main force and walking
off with her, as she more than half expected him to

do, here he was repeating to her what her mother had told him, and instead of saying "Come!" he was asking her advice. . . . She thought he was coming for her to take her away like a god, whereas here he was presenting a new theory to her in anything but a god-like way. ("Genius" 656)

Witla thus departs without his prize, nurturing the illusion that he can return for it after gathering his other laurels.

Eventual realization ensues, and defeat over Suzanne's loss is accompanied by Angela's death during childbirth. Born by cesarian, Witla's daughter is at first "discolored, impossible, a myth, a monster" to Witla's eyes ("Genius" 720) but gradually becomes the only true love of his life. The reader is left to hope that the girl will teach her father those lessons in humanity which dozens of grown women could not. A few years pass, and

Again women entered his life—never believe otherwise—drawn, perhaps, by a certain wistfulness and loneliness in Eugene, who though quieted by tragedy for a little while was once more moving in the world. . . . From the many approaches, letters and meetings, some few relationships resulted, ending as others had ended. Was he not changed, then? Not much—no. Only hardened intellectually and emotionally—tempered for life and work. ("Genius" 734)

Sexuality, then, remains a part of the artist's life and an integral component of his maturer (because weathered) psyche. His return to art is characterized no longer by a freak of genius but by the skill and wisdom that, as the Greeks insisted, come only through suffering.

Notes

¹ Swanberg 203-11 and Lingeman 130-39 recount the battle.

² Randolph Bourne, in a review from late 1915, noted the "Greek tragic note" and "almost Greek irony" of the novel. As to sexuality as a force: "The Genius, swept away by girlish beauty, is himself bewildered by the vehemence of the Unknown Eros within him" (245). Aside from its reference to pre/non-Christian cultures, the word "pagan" had meanings for Dreiser not readily reconcilable by the

critic. For instance, both Witla and Clyde Griffiths are so described (AT 9, "*Genius*" 734). Dreiser refers to his mother Sarah, for whom he felt unequivocal devotion, as "a pagan mother taken over into the Catholic church at marriage" and "a great poet mother" (qtd. in Moers 298). A letter to an unidentified woman, possibly a lover, "X," provides the most provocative gloss of all: "Dear [X]: The trouble with you is that you are not a bad girl but rather an unthinking and indiscreet one. Granting that you are a pagan and that you feel that you can do as you please, sexually and in every other way, it might occur to you that you cannot just plunge madly into every man's life and assume that because of your physical and mental charm you can have your way" (Elias 694). The letter goes on to mildly berate X for various improprieties and to warn her that she will "wind up in some tragedy" if she persists in such behavior (Elias 696). Despite this, Dreiser seems nearly always to use the term complimentarily—I have located no usage which seems unambiguously negative.

³ The pervasive literary association of women with nature as a means to the oppression of both is a current concern of ecofeminism. See Donovan 204-08 for a survey of issues and schisms within the movement.

⁴ As well she might, since women of her time were trained in the practice "of improving the male of the species through the modeling of virtue." Hussman recounts, in "The World According to Timothy Titcomb," how a nineteenth-century conception of "female duty meshes with the classic Madonna complex" in a popular advice manual (27-28).

⁵ The letter, dated November 30, 1914, was to inform Mencken, whose appraisal of the novel Dreiser sought, that the first sixty-six chapters were on their way. He was particular about the altered title, and for more than one reason: "Please note that the title, '*The Genius*' is quoted. . . . There is another book, still on sale in old book stores called *The Genius*—a Russian locale. To avoid being bothered by the author and to convey the exact question which I mean to imply I am quoting my title" (Elias 183). I believe the "implied" "exact question" to have been the status of Witla as ironic hero. Bourne speculated in 1915 about the quotation marks in Dreiser's title. He believed they indicated "Mr. Dreiser's realization that he has created only a second-rate personality. . . . In the *Genius* he has made, however, a grandiose caricature of the masculine soul" (246).

⁶ Gerber 112; Lehan 117-18; Hussman, *Quest* 91; Swanberg 145; Lingeman 23-26 all agree.

⁷ In *Ulysses* (1922), Joyce made Stephen an expert on Hamlet, himself a famous embodiment of the archetype and, as Paul A. Cantor

has brilliantly demonstrated, a character torn between the inheritances of Christianity and classical heroism.

⁸ And like Leopold Bloom's, these adventures are reduced by the author to the everyday level while retaining vestiges of mythic suggestiveness, emphasizing the psychological focus of modern heroism. For example, when Witla's health fails, he seeks employment as a day-laborer in a railroad shop, in which he must treat with such workers as Bill Jeffords, otherwise known as "One Eye" ("*Genius*" 319), and Harry Fornes, "a minor Titan" ("*Genius*" 323).

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Vision and Revision: Another Look at the 1912 and 1927 Editions of Dreiser's *The Financier*

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After establishing his reputation as a novelist with the publication of *An American Tragedy* in 1925, Theodore Dreiser revisited one of his earlier novels, *The Financier*, and with his personal secretary, Louise Campbell, revised it extensively. Dreiser enjoyed neither the money nor the time to do anything else with his *Trilogy of Desire* before *An American Tragedy*. But with his newly found success, he decided to revise a novel that Campbell claims he “never felt entirely satisfied with, one reason being that it had been written under pressure; rushed for delivery to the publisher in order to get money to live on” (27). Dreiser asked Campbell to help him revise *The Financier* in late 1925, but media obligations resulting from the success of *An American Tragedy* kept him away from the initial revisions. Instead, the responsibility fell solely to Campbell. By the spring of 1926, she had made a typescript containing a few minor revisions.¹ Later, Dreiser and Campbell each edited a set of the 1912 galleys and produced two new sets of galleys, in which most of the revisions take place. Boni and Liveright republished the *Financier* in 1927, two-hundred-and-seventy-seven pages and fifteen chapters shorter than the 1912 edition.

Though the *Financier* underwent a facelift in 1927, major revisions to the novel began long before its original October 1912 publishing date. Ripley Hitchcock, managing editor of Harper and Brothers, substantially revised the original manuscript Dreiser submitted. Most of what Hitchcock eliminated dealt with Cowperwood's financial activities and Dreiser's excessive philosophical comments on Cowperwood's life. In addition, Dreiser asked Harpers to send the manuscript to his close friend H. L. Mencken, whereupon Mencken suggested

the deletion of several passages, including the removal of the lawyer's speeches at Cowperwood's trial. Dreiser complied without argument.

Interestingly, Dreiser, who throughout his career was famous for fighting editors he claimed sanitized his novels, said little against the editing of *The Financier*. James Hutchisson believes Dreiser let the editorial changes stand because his most recent novel, *Jennie Gerhardt*, had been relatively successful, and Dreiser "most likely thought of Harpers favorably at this time and might have felt that the success of *Jennie* could be credited at least partly to Harpers' editing" ("The Creation" 253). Furthermore, Dreiser probably left the revisions alone because he simply wanted to be a successful novelist, or at least successful enough to make a living from writing. In fact, he told Mencken as much: "I expect to try out this book game for about four or five books after which unless I am enjoying a good income from them I will quit" (Riggio 1: 111). With *Sister Carrie* and *Jennie Gerhardt* and even his later novels, Dreiser often allowed friends and mistresses to edit and revise his manuscripts. Nevertheless, Hutchisson notes that *The Financier* was the first of Dreiser's novels with which he had no assistance other than the revisions of Harpers and Mencken; in a sense, Harpers became almost his sole editor ("The Creation" 254). Regardless, the 1912 edition failed to attract an audience.

The main controversy involving the 1927 revisions, and one that will probably never be resolved, is over who actually did the bulk of the work. A marked up 1912 edition by Dreiser might have shed some light on this controversy, but it no longer exists. Although Campbell revised a set of galleys of the 1912 edition, Dreiser, as Hutchisson explains, "seems to have been unhappy with the extensive cuts Campbell had made" and "working on Campbell's set of galley proofs, honored many of her deletions but rebuilt other passages, writing new material in the margins of the galleys and in some cases cutting and pasting new typewritten passages onto the galley sheets" ("The Creation" 257). Hutchisson, however, in a more recent article, "The Revision of Theodore Dreiser's *Financier*," questions the role Dreiser actually played in the novel's revisions. Despite acknowledging Dreiser's uneasiness over most of Campbell's

alterations, he insists that because Dreiser granted her control of the initial revision of the 1912 text and the initial revision of the first set of galleys, she must be the authority (204). Hutchisson mentions that Dreiser was too busy on other projects at the time such as *Chains*, *Moods: Cadenced and Declaimed*, and *The Stoic* to have given her revisions a thorough examination. He also suggests that since Dreiser was preparing to embark on an extensive tour of eastern Europe, he did not truly help Campbell with the revisions until returning to the United States in October of 1926. As evidence, Hutchisson argues convincingly that before Dreiser left for Europe in June of 1926, he wrote to Campbell about the original typescript and twice refers to it as “your [Campbell’s] corrections” (Campbell 34; “The Revision” 203).

Granted, Hutchisson’s belief that Campbell had much to do with the early revisions is valid, but his suggestion leads one to assume that Dreiser had little say in the final outcome of the 1927 text. In fact, Hutchisson even admits that to what extent Dreiser was involved in the initial set of galleys is “not conclusive” (202). We do know from a letter to Campbell on 1 August 1926 that he had revised the first three chapters of the galleys in Europe: “Have changed 1st chapter or rather have made chapter 3 and chapter 1 into chapter one. Also cut out much of the romanticism” (35). On 27 August, however, Dreiser instructed Campbell not to send him any more of the galleys because he had “decided to wait and clean it up finally in N. Y.” (36). When Dreiser returned in October, he and Campbell both revised the galleys. How much Dreiser revised the galleys after chapter 3 in Europe is not known, but given the nature in which the revisions alter the characterization of Frank Cowperwood and seem to parallel the decline of Progressivism, it is possible that Dreiser participated in or at least supervised the later stages of the revisions. Most of the major revisions made to *The Financier* can be classified into four categories: Cowperwood’s under- or overdone individualism, his cutthroat business dealings, his licentious sex life, and his outright rejection of religion. These revisions suggest that they are too patterned and too Dreiserian to be solely Campbell’s. Besides, in a letter to Robert Wilkinson, Campbell confirms that “the

revised version of 'Financier' had to be, in the end, exactly what Dreiser wanted it to be" (33). Before turning to the revisions themselves, I would like to briefly establish a context for Dreiser's motivations in taking a hand in the revisions.

Nowhere does Dreiser better show Progressive ethical codes of conduct as hypocritical and impractical than in *The Financier*. This novel depicts the life of Frank Cowperwood, a character based upon the late nineteenth-century Chicago traction tycoon Charles Tyson Yerkes. Cowperwood, a brilliant financier, engages in unethical and cutthroat business practices to accumulate wealth and social prestige. Much of his wealth comes from hypothecating funds from the Philadelphia city treasury to invest in local street-railway property. The Chicago fire of 1871, however, causes the market to plummet, and Cowperwood is caught short and unable to return the money he appropriated from the city treasury. Motivated by Cowperwood's adulterous affair with his daughter, Edward Butler, a business associate, exploits a technicality in the Philadelphia municipal courts and sends him to prison. Nonetheless, he is eventually pardoned and returns to the stock market where he ruthlessly reestablishes his wealth after the Jay Cooke failure of 1873.

When Dreiser wrote his novel, he intended to examine the American business community through the lens of a Darwinian telescope and uncover its survival-of-the-fittest ethic. Dreiser's Cowperwood illustrates the corruption of the American admiration for Emersonian self-reliance combined with the business opportunities brought about during the westward expansion. The intense competitive spirit in American business compelled many ambitious, intelligent, and opportune entrepreneurs to rely on cutthroat tactics to get ahead, and not surprisingly, Dreiser creates a businessman with the motto, "I satisfy myself." Unregulated business coupled with private capitalism was simply an environment too tempting not to exploit. Regardless of Cowperwood's amorality, Dreiser respects him for his straightforward approach to life, his moral pragmatism, and his logical refutation of Christian ethics. In fact, Cowperwood outwardly displays his desires for wealth and sexual pleasure with satisfaction. Rather than yielding to

quixotic Christian notions, Cowperwood realizes that abiding by a set of moral codes does not necessarily coincide with monetary success. One Dreiser scholar in particular, Philip Gerber, correctly assesses Dreiser's reasons for using Yerkes as a model for Cowperwood: "Yerkes was not worse than other rich men, only less hypocritical" (Introduction vii).

When the novel first appeared in 1912, the Progressive Reform Movement, consisting mostly of middle-class religionists, businessmen, publishers, and academics, had, as H. L. Mencken often observed, placed the country "in a state of moral mania" (Riggio 1: 246). As Robert Wiebe points out, by 1912 the Progressive moralists had achieved "not only their greatest strength but their tightest integration as well" (208) and had gained widespread support and majority representation in practically every institution in the country, particularly political and social arenas. Paul Boyer, a noted social historian, agrees and posits that the movement unsuccessfully attempted to construct a Kantian moral order out of the ruins of Populist ideals:

For Progressives of all stripes, as for their predecessors in the 1890s, questions of social injustice, corporate wrongdoing, governmental corruption, and personal morality were inextricably linked. Almost every Progressive cause had its moral dimension; almost every condition Progressives set out to change was seen as contributing to a debilitating social environment that made it easier for people to go wrong and harder for them to go right. (196)

Because the movement established Protestant ethics within all spheres of American life, Dreiser's *Financier*, a novel littered with truculent naturalism and Spencerian overtones, did not fair well critically in 1912.

Mencken, however, understood that the excessive moralism of the 'teens would eventually wear thin with the American public. The twenties proved him right, for by this time, "the dregs of the coercive moral-control-impulse were left to isolated fanatics" (Wiebe 218). In fact, Wiebe observes that "a number of sins were catching up with the urban progressives. . . . The

delusive assumption that all good citizens shared their goals—or would as soon as they were explained—led them to trample sensibilities without regard for the resentment that was accumulating about them” (212). Ironically, the revisions made in 1927 not only coincide with Mencken’s prediction, but they are also directed at the laws, institutions, and moral codes that he believed moralists “hid behind” (Riggio 1: 246).

The 1920s, with its more lax but still conservative reading audience, would have been an appropriate time for Dreiser to republish his novel. Besides, the reconfiguration of America’s economic system from private to corporate capitalism early in the 20th century fostered a pro-businessman environment in the 1920s. Many affluent businessmen supported the Progressive Movement and used their political power to promote reform platforms and to establish civic organizations that hailed paternalism as a means of controlling the moral lives of the lower and middle classes. This strong influence made the successful businessman the apotheosis of the model citizen.² The revisions to *The Financier* undermine this sacrosanct status of the businessman and focus partly on the American public’s hypocritical nature toward materialism. As Gerald Willen summarizes, once Cowperwood “amasses his great wealth and acquires the power that automatically goes with it, society and Dreiser as well begin to regard him with awe and esteem” (183). In addition, Dreiser worked off and on with *The Bulwark* throughout the twenties, a novel whose theme also deals with the antagonism between the spirit and the dollar. After witnessing the success of F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* and Sinclair Lewis’ *Babbitt*, Dreiser might have seen an opportunity to attract an audience for his novel.³ More telling though is that he saw the decline of the Progressive Era, and since he was always candid and often invidious in his commentary on religionists and Progressive Era moralists who supported reform ideals, the cuts, alterations, and additions made to the 1927 text ironically persuade a generally moralistic reading public into accepting a ruthless business pirate.

After reading the revised novel and realizing they had identified with an amoral capitalist in Cowperwood, moralists would have to confront the pecuniary system of values that

Dreiser thought most Americans upheld. In other words, these revisions pressure moral readers into confronting their often dogmatic notions concerning materialism and sexual mores and constitute a negotiation between Dreiser's social perspective and the moral hypocrisy he saw in America. The Cowperwood of 1912 illustrates the Nietzschean superman too well, but by tempering Cowperwood's amorality in 1927, Dreiser successfully evokes sympathy for his Machiavellian prince. The new Cowperwood emerges as strong and secure, attractive in his rugged individualism but compassionate enough to appeal to the American public.

One does not have to read far into the 1927 edition to notice the differences between it and its 1912 counterpart. One of the first scenes removed from the novel was a schoolyard fight between Cowperwood and a school bully. The skirmish between Cowperwood and Spat McGlathery begins when Spat calls Frank a "Momma's Boy" and spits tobacco on his feet. Cowperwood is alone in the fight, and to prove his individual worth, he must rely upon his physical strength. In the first version, Cowperwood never thinks or reasons as later descriptions of his personality dictate. Instead, "like a flash, though naturally calm, he dropped his books and went for his opponent" (1912, 6). Frank then proceeds to "plant his right fist swift and straight on young McGlathery's jaw, then his left in the same place, then his right on the latter's mouth, then his left square between the latter's mouth and nose" (1912, 6). Throughout the fight in the 1912 edition, Dreiser stressed the word "force" in describing Frank's physical strength: "The latter [Frank] *forced* him back steadily" (1912, 6, my emphasis); "Cowperwood drove him by sheer *force* and swiftness about the sidewalk" (1912, 6, my emphasis); "Frank maneuvered the former's head under his arm by sheer, hard *force* and punched him vigorously" (1912, 7, my emphasis); and "Cowperwood *forced* him to the pavement, punching him and sitting astride of him" (1912, 7, my emphasis).

For Wilkinson, the Spat McGlathery fight, in its Darwinian theme, merely duplicates the famous lobster-squid battle that occurs soon afterward and is therefore redundant (48). Nonetheless, the fight is more than a simple redundancy. Rather,

it is a passage that presents rugged individualism and self-reliance, but only in regard to physical strength. Keeping the fight passage in the novel meant compromising Dreiser's original characterization of Frank. He intended Cowperwood to rely upon his intelligence, wit, and subtlety to succeed in business, not physical prowess. Dreiser felt that the reader would better identify with a self-sufficient young man able to succeed through the use of his mind rather than the animal exhibited in the fist fight. Wilkinson and Hutchisson, however, fail to mention that the 1913 abridgement did not delete the fight entirely but did remove the sentences containing the word "force." Although these cuts eliminate Cowperwood's excessive physical force, a fight still represents the use of brute strength, thus remaining at odds with Cowperwood's subtle personality. Consequently, Dreiser probably removed the scene entirely from the 1927 galleys.

Cowperwood's rugged individualism is more appealing when based on intelligence instead of physical strength, but places where Frank remains extreme in his individualism and emerges as overly selfish and malicious within and outside of the business community still had to be buffered. One such place occurs just before the end of the eighth chapter in the 1912 edition. In 1927, a scene is omitted in which Ed Tighe, Cowperwood's second employer, sympathizes with one of his brokers after letting him go because of financial pressures brought on by the looming prospect of a Civil War. One reason for the deletion is apparent. Cowperwood's personal ambitions are unsavory when he shows no sympathy for those Tighe lets go because of a difficult economic situation: "It was hard logic, sad, cruel; but what else could Tighe or any man do? He couldn't reasonably jeopardize himself" (1912, 92). Here, Frank's egocentricity runs unbridled and his individualism becomes unattractive. The passage was appropriately deleted.

To maintain consistency, two similar passages were cut from the 1912 text. The first occurs at the beginning of Chapter X, where Cowperwood thinks coldly about Tighe's handling of the pleading employee: "Like Tighe, when appealed to, a man had better say 'I can't' or 'I won't' firmly and let it go at that. You couldn't be generous or kind in times of stress. Look at the

conditions on the stock market” (1912, 102). These lines were excised because they characterize Cowperwood as completely heartless, insensitive, and socially irresponsible, his emotions regulated by the stock ticker. The second passage occurs when Frank is first introduced to George Stener, the city treasurer whom Frank befriends to borrow money from the treasury for speculative purposes. Stener knowingly becomes a pawn for Mollenhauer in securing street railway stocks, and Dreiser shows Frank as indifferent:

He had long ago settled for himself that he did not propose to trouble himself about people’s motives. . . . So long as he was free and clear of any legal complicity, any intention to defraud, what did it concern him where his customers came from, who they were, or how they obtained their money. (1912, 176)

Since most Progressive reformers and moralists believed in honesty and a Republican hard work ethic, Dreiser realized that pursuing corrupt business too forcefully made Cowperwood repulsive. Moreover, the uncut passage reveals Frank as selfish and against social responsibility, a character trait reformers often emphasized. Cutting this passage further coincides with Dreiser’s overall plan to downplay Frank’s guilt in not returning appropriated monies to the sinking fund, for Dreiser tells us that everyone is involved in exploiting the system, including the Irish Catholic Edward Butler. Frank did no more than anyone else. In fact, we are led to believe Frank might never have been sent to prison if it were not for Butler’s need for revenge. De-emphasizing Frank’s guilt, combined with revisions intended to soften his individualism and amorality, helps a conservative reading audience identify with him, despite his embezzlement of funds from the city treasury.

Just as Cowperwood’s individualism in business is too extreme and leads to a disagreeable egocentricity in the 1912 edition, it is also too extreme in his life outside business. Cowperwood remains stoical to a point, but certain 1912 sections, if not removed, would have ruined any possibility for any reading audience of the time to identify with him. The following passage not only shows Dreiser softening Frank’s

egocentricity, but it also reveals a mistake in his characterization of him:

Once he saw a great, disheveled, dusty, and blood-stained company of men returning from Gettysburg, their knapsacks awry, their blankets dirty, their arms or foreheads or legs roughly bandaged in several instances, and he thought this would make a great battle picture. If he were an artist, now! But he wasn't, and so, after a few minutes, he put the thought briskly aside. But these things were haunting him at odd moments, and he thought, that once he was indestructibly rich, he would probably come to live in a very notable manner, not grandiose, but beautiful. (1912, 182)

In Chapter XVII page 1 of the 1913 abridgement, the lines following "If he were an artist, now," were eliminated. Apparently, juxtaposing Cowperwood's fixation on wealth with the tattered soldiers made him insensitive and selfish. In 1927 however, the section was omitted entirely because the first half of the passage is not much better than the second. To a degree, Cowperwood must exhibit self-reliance in the business community, but in a non-competitive environment, Frank, to gain public acceptance, must show some empathy for those around him. In fact, earlier in the novel, in a passage allowed to remain in the 1927 edition, Dreiser portrays Frank as sympathetic toward a union enlistee: "The poor fool who fell in behind the enlisting squad—no, not fool, he would not call him that—the poor overwrought working-man—well, Heaven pity him! Heaven pity all of them! They really did not know what they were doing (1927, 66). Here, Cowperwood's pity is the product of his intelligence rather than insensitivity.

Cowperwood's excessive individualism in 1912 also negatively affects those around him. In the 1912 edition, Cowperwood's father, Henry, is shattered emotionally because of his son's failure. Henry Cowperwood laments to himself, "Frank had been so able, plain-spoken, practical, that he [Henry] had been hypnotized into believing everything he did was right" (1912, 408). Not long afterwards, Henry completely loses control of his emotions and cries, "His sense of pride and

position! His Frank! His personal honor! His bank presidency! His sons and daughters! His wife! And he was old now" (1912, 409). Dreiser also describes Henry's physical appearance as follows: "He could not eat; he could not sleep. He could only think and calculate and hurry here and there in an aimless way. He was losing flesh, and he was as weak as though he were ill" (1912, 409). The first passage, eliminated in the 1913 abridgement, gives the impression that Frank not only caused his father's mental and physical deterioration but also brainwashed him into confusing right and wrong. The second passage, also deleted in 1913, compels the reader to feel sympathy for Henry and blame Frank's greed and ambition for his father's mental breakdown, thus turning the reader away from his positive qualities such as ambition and perseverance. The third passage serves only the same purpose as the second. Henry's pathetic physical appearance coerces the reader to sneer at Frank's selfishness. The 1927 edition condenses the pages devoted to Henry's downfall into two paragraphs. One depicts Henry as sympathetic and aware, though not critical, of Frank's misconduct:

As has been said, he had had tremendous faith in his son; but he could not help seeing that an error had been committed, as he thought, and that Frank was suffering greatly for it now. He considered, of course, that Frank had been entitled to try to save himself as he had; but he so regretted that his son should have put his foot into the trap of any situation which could stir up discussion of the sort that was now being aroused. (1927, 276)

Since Henry is described early as honest and virtuous and here justifies Frank's right to save himself, it is easier to forgive Frank for his questionable business ethics.

Furthermore, the 1927 Cowperwood is concerned about his own failure *and* his father's: "He might get on his feet again if he failed; but it would be uphill work. And his father! His father would be pulled down with him" (235). The reader can identify with Frank's sympathy for his father in this passage. Later, after discussing the possibility of failure, Henry is disheartened and Cowperwood "suffered intensely for him. What a shame! His

father! He felt a great surge of sorrow sweep over him" (1927, 241). These passages soften Frank's selfishness and rugged individualism.

Not only does the 1912 edition imply that Frank ruined his father financially and emotionally, but it also suggests that he did the same to George Stener's family. In both editions, Cowperwood pressures Stener into giving him more money out of the treasury to dodge the financial crisis. Thus, Cowperwood's will to succeed, in the 1912 edition, can be connected to the fall of Stener and his family. Stener embodies the weak who fall by the wayside in Dreiser's Darwinian philosophy, but Dreiser overdid his decline. Following a discussion with her husband, Mrs. Stener

went out of the room after a time; but it was only to go into another bedroom and stare out of a window onto the faded grass of the fall. She always thought of [Stener] and herself and children as a collective unit. . . . They would be very poor again, and, worst of all, disgraced. That was what hurt her. She stared and twisted her bony little hands. (1912, 480)

Dreiser reveals sympathy for his characters in this passage, but it works against him because the reader can conceivably feel sorry for the city treasurer's family and justifiably link Cowperwood to their now impoverished condition. As a result, about three pages of detailed description of the scene from the 1913 abridgement and the 1927 galleys were cut. Dreiser realized the public could accuse Cowperwood of insensitivity and cold-heartedness, especially since he did pressure Stener during the panic and is contemptuous of Stener's weakness during the trial. Stener's wife is hardly mentioned in the 1927 edition, and Stener, himself, appears just as responsible for his criminal activity as Cowperwood and shares blame for the demise of his family. He not only agreed with Cowperwood's scheme to exploit city funds, but he made his own private investments without Cowperwood.

Granted, Frank remains selfish in both editions of *The Financier*, and, in 1927, he still manipulates business associates to succeed. But most identify with the 1927 Cowperwood because he appeals to America's respect for wealth. With the

revisions, the moral reader identifies with Cowperwood and either knowingly or unknowingly commits hypocrisy, for though his individualism is made attractive, the 1927 Cowperwood is still greedy and selfish. Romanticizing the rugged individualist, as seen in the lingering effects of the Horatio Alger novels two decades before, was not uncommon. Dreiser realized that most Americans would sacrifice the Puritan work ethic celebrated in these novels if it meant achieving wealth and power. The 1912 edition pushes this notion too far and clashes with the moralists of the time while the 1927 edition advances a palatable hypocrisy.

Much of Dreiser's naturalist philosophy opposes the moralists' attempt to establish a Kantian social order. Dreiser, instead, supports the notion that "morality is always larger than the explicit codes through which men say they rule their actions, and life larger than any of its codes and rules" (Vivas 243). Similar to the German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer, Dreiser believed the passionate heart, when aroused, overwhelms reason and that at best people could only temporarily quiet primal passions. As a result, the Cowperwood of 1912 borders on perversion and lechery at times, and because of the Progressive Movement, such behavior would only repulse reformers, the same reformers who sanitized *Sister Carrie* in 1900 for its exploration of an adulterous affair. Thus, the 1927 text eliminated passages where Frank's promiscuity is overdone and deleted sections where his philosophical commentary forcefully challenged Christian ethics.

Softening Frank's sexual amorality and his anti-religious observations makes him more acceptable to the American public in 1927. Cowperwood's insatiable sex drive, though probably as much a reflection of Dreiser's own sex drive as of Yerkes', is lecherous enough to raise a moralist's eyebrows, particularly in 1912. For instance, after Cowperwood becomes financially stable, he hosts his first party for Philadelphia's socialites. He asks Aileen, Edward Butler's daughter, to dance, but in both the 1912 edition and the 1913 abridgement, he is forward, lustful, and almost perverted in his private thoughts: "Her arms were beautiful. That little beauty-spot! And the dimple! He could see it" (1912, 231; 1913 abridgement, chapter XX, 188). With his

wife Lillian in the next room, Cowperwood, in this passage, is overtly enthusiastic and desirous of Aileen. In 1927, the lines were omitted, leaving only the following line showing Frank seeming almost shy as he asks her to dance: "His cheeks flushed a little as he said this" (1927, 129). The omission thus transforms Frank from aggressive lecher to bashful suitor. In addition, the flushing of Frank's cheeks hints at biological determinism, for Frank is surprised, even embarrassed, at his strong desire to dance with Aileen, perhaps encouraging the moral reader to view him as not entirely responsible for his actions.

Chapter XXXIX from the 1912 edition was deleted entirely because it consists of a secret meeting between Aileen and Cowperwood. The rendezvous, though harmless, contains some questionable material, with Cowperwood condoning his affair with Aileen. Just after Butler discovers his relationship with Aileen, Cowperwood "marveled a little at himself—taking the time on this day of all days to come and see her—but he said to himself that one need never regret the bright moments of love and yearning affection as lost" (1912, 435). When Aileen arrived, she "threw her arms around his neck and held him close, her lips crushed to his" (1912, 435), exclaiming, "'Oh, honey, honey, honey!'" and "'Oh, my darling boy!'" (1912, 435). Here, Dreiser loudly broadcasts the affair to a public already critical of adultery. To develop the affair discreetly, these passages and other detailed accounts of Frank and Aileen's affections were eliminated in the 1927 edition. Hutchisson correctly links these revisions to Aileen's emotional and physical maturation, but not solely because Dreiser "was experimenting with his theme of the young woman whose craving for life and beauty is often handicapped by social restrictions but who remains pure, whatever her sexual sins, because of her liberality of spirit" ("The Revision" 208). In addition, establishing Aileen's maturity and sexual awareness causes the moral reader to hold her just as accountable as Frank for her actions in the affair. In the 1927 edition, when Frank strikes a relationship with Aileen, he is seriously smitten, but she is nearly twenty years old rather than seventeen.

The 1927 Cowperwood still commits adultery, but Dreiser

counterbalances the affair by heightening his concern for his family. Just before Frank begins his prison sentence at the Eastern District Penitentiary of Pennsylvania, Dreiser added chapter LI to the 1927 edition. In this chapter, Cowperwood shows regret, compassion, and responsibility for his wife and children. Frank “realized that his general moral or unmoral attitude was perhaps working them [his children] a temporary injustice” (1927, 413). He “had no intention of forsaking them [his children] financially, if he could help it,” and he “did not want to separate his wife from her children, nor them from her” (413). The reader can identify with a character who realizes he has neglected his domestic obligations and suffers remorse. These revisions challenge Robie MacCauley’s claim that “Cowperwood always remains fairly wooden and lifeless in the domestic scenes and his many love affairs” (660). Moreover, in the section added, Cowperwood warmly embraces his daughter, squeezes her waist, gently pulls her curly hair, and softly kisses her mouth (1927, 414), a combination of gestures that are hardly “wooden” and “lifeless.” Frank’s thoughtfulness further diverts the reader’s attention from his questionable affair with Aileen and from his shady business practices. Though not a traditional family man in either edition, Cowperwood at least appears more human and supportive of his family in the 1927 edition. In fact, in some passages, the 1927 Cowperwood is the life force of his family, the one they depend upon for strength. For example, after he leaves for prison in chapter LI of the 1927 edition, “his family, hearing the door close on him, suffered a poignant sense of desolation. They stood there for a moment, his mother crying, his father looking as though he had lost his last friend” (415).

Besides deleting passages exposing Cowperwood’s lecherous behavior and adding passages to show Frank’s renewed domestic responsibility, many editorial cuts and alterations were made to tone down anti-religious commentary and excessive Darwinian philosophy. At Cowperwood’s social gathering and while Aileen contemplates committing adultery, Dreiser disparages moralists for not accepting his belief in biological determinism. Dreiser writes, “The slogan of the moralist is that we can all do right if we want to. The answer is that the spirit of man is clothed over with a fleshly envelope

which has moods and subtleties of its own" (1912, 247). Three pages later, a similar, pagan philosophy emerges:

A Christian ideal had been poured out upon the world like a sea of air, and those who live in it, who are many, draw their convictions as their breath from that. It is not necessarily native to them. Something underneath—the flesh, for instance, and material pleasure—wars against it; but it is almost a part of their blood, so long has the world moved in it. (1912, 250)

In these excerpts, Dreiser lacked diplomacy and presented his Darwinian philosophy too forcefully. Though Aileen and Cowperwood do fall prey to biological determinism, Dreiser outwardly condemns Christian idealism for its ignorance of this concept. Belittling moralists instead of persuading them with tact and subtlety alienates a circumspect audience from the novel's naturalism. The above passage remains in the 1913 abridgement, but due to its thematic importance, it was condensed in the 1927 galleys to offer a more diplomatic but still cogent appeal:

It is a question as to what would have happened if antagonistic forces could have been introduced just at this time. Emotions and liaisons of this character can, of course, occasionally be broken up and destroyed. The characters of the individuals can be modified or changed to a certain extent, but the force must be quite sufficient. Fear is a great deterrent—fear of material loss where there is no spiritual dread—but wealth and position so often tend to destroy this dread. It is so easy to scheme with means. (1927, 139)

In short, in this passage the public must judge for themselves about the extent of Aileen and Cowperwood's animal attraction for one another.

Another particular way Dreiser uncovers the hypocrisy often found in moralists and religious reformers of the time is by juxtaposing Frank Cowperwood with Edward Butler. Throughout the novel, Dreiser characterizes Butler as a ruthless businessman in public affairs but a staunch Irish Catholic in

domestic affairs. Unlike Butler, Cowperwood never claims to believe in a moral code or Christian ethics. Dreiser exposes Butler's hypocrisy in two ways. First, after discovering his daughter's affair with Frank and despite his own immorality, Butler refuses to listen to her explanations, condemns her, and embarks upon a moral crusade to save her soul. Second, Butler exhibits little sympathy for Cowperwood's financial failure and actively seeks revenge for Cowperwood's affair with his daughter, an attitude that is hardly Christian.

To Dreiser, Butler and religious reformers lived double standards, by which a man's public and private morality could differ. For this reason, Dreiser uses the Butler/Cowperwood comparison to show the hypocrisy of American values and to show his respect for men like Cowperwood, who accepts his survival-of-the-fittest outlook on society. Dreiser wanted the reader to discover the impossibility of living life by a set of moral codes. Forcing them to identify with Cowperwood and to witness Butler's hypocrisy accomplishes this goal in the 1927 edition.

Nevertheless, in 1912, Dreiser occasionally portrays Butler as justified in his revenge and accidentally evokes sympathy for him and not Cowperwood. To fix this problem, passages affecting the Butler/Cowperwood comparison had to be revised. Before the panic, Cowperwood anticipates the financial storm he must face and tries to gain Butler's support should he not be able to cover his loans. Cowperwood hopes Butler's political influence will convince Mollenhauer and Senator Simpson to support the market. Butler does attempt to persuade them but is not willing to force the issue if it means sacrificing his money or his political power. During his conference with Mollenhauer and Simpson in the 1912 edition, Butler is more sympathetic to Cowperwood than need be; he "was not unsympathetic in his attitude toward Cowperwood. He remembered with pleasure the favors he had done the young financier in earlier days" (328). Though the passage remains in the abridged version, Dreiser probably had a hand in deleting this passage completely from the galleys because Butler clearly feels compassion for Cowperwood's plight. Later, when Butler discovers Frank's liaison with his daughter, he turns against him and seeks

revenge. Showing Butler as understanding inadvertently encourages the reader to feel he is justified in influencing the courts to convict Frank of embezzlement. To make Butler more hypocritical, the above passage was cut and the following line left in the 1927 edition: “‘My judgement would be,’ said Butler, in a rather obscure manner, thinking of Cowperwood’s mistake in appealing to these noble protectors [Mollenhauer and Simpson], ‘that it’s best to let sleepin’ dogs run by thimselves’” (193). Here, Butler shows little mercy for Frank despite their friendship, and he defies the Catholic principles of loyalty and goodwill in the process.

From chapter XLVII of the 1912 edition (chapter XXXVII in the 1927 edition), about three pages were eliminated where Butler is portrayed as a justified reformer, looking out for Aileen’s best interests. Butler “was ready to consider any proposition which would save [Aileen]” (1912, 524); “Aileen must be got out of this atmosphere, got out soon, whatever happened” (1912, 524); and “he must take her in hand and save her” (1912, 525). Combined, these lines show Butler concerned about rescuing his daughter’s soul, not unlike the reformers’ intentions during the Prohibition era in regard to the American population. Consequently, Butler becomes one with the reformers in these passages, so much so that the reader might relate to him and not see the double standards he represents. In a sense, in 1912, Butler becomes a savior, not an antagonist. In the 1913 abridgement, the revisions start with the deletion of “He must take her in hand and save her” (1913 abridgement, 441).

To draw sympathy to Cowperwood, Dreiser inserted a paragraph in chapter XLVI of the 1927 edition. Just after the trial and after Aileen moves out of the Butler home, Butler visits Cowperwood and attempts to persuade him to reveal where Aileen is staying. Throughout the tense conversation, Cowperwood informs Butler of his feelings for Aileen and his intentions of marrying her. Butler, for the first time, abdicates his steadfast Christian principles, reviews the situation more objectively, and admits that Cowperwood might be sincere. In fact, Cowperwood’s “promises might all be wrong, but perhaps he did love Aileen; and it was possible that he did intend to get a

divorce from his wife some time and marry her (1927, 384). Wilkinson explains the added passage as Butler's being more loving, less adamant, and somewhat forgiving (92), but his explanation is problematic. Although seemingly humanized in this passage, Butler only appears to be forgiving because, similar to the reader accepting Cowperwood, Butler's moral system breaks down with the questioning of his Catholic principles. Later in the paragraph, Butler recognizes that divorce "was against the rules of the Catholic church, which he so much revered . . . he knew that ultimately he could not countenance any such thing—certainly not and keep his faith with the Church—but he was human enough none the less to consider it" (1927, 384). Here, Butler exhibits the philosophy Dreiser intended to illustrate in his novel. Butler not only contradicts his moral principles but he also shows how life, in many cases, is larger than any system of morals. Hutchisson acknowledges that Butler is less sympathetic in the 1927 edition and not "a father who attacks Cowperwood in the name of parental love" ("The Revision" 210), but he never explains why.

Besides the Spats McGlathery fight, critics often mention the addition of the lawyers' speeches at the end of Cowperwood's trial in chapter XLIII of the 1927 edition. Originally, at Mencken's suggestion, Dreiser eliminated them before the publication of the 1912 edition. However, in 1927, Dreiser restored the speeches and his commentary on them to the novel. Since the speeches show the American political and judicial systems as corrupt and invite the reader's skepticism regarding Cowperwood's guilt, Dreiser made a wise decision.

Throughout his closing argument, Steger (Cowperwood's lawyer) continually refers to the Republican party's scheme to make Cowperwood a scapegoat. If Stener, a pawn for the Republican party, assumes responsibility, it could severely damage the Republicans during the elections. Thus, Steger downplays Cowperwood's involvement in the scandal, arguing that the case against Cowperwood

was simply a case of wild, silly panic on the part of George W. Stener, and a strong desire on the part of the Republican party leaders, once they discovered what the situation was, to find someone outside of

Stener, the party treasurer, upon whom they could blame the shortage in the treasury. (1927, 353)

In a sense, Steger's argument fittingly coincides with Dreiser's downplaying of Cowperwood's guilt throughout the novel.

Shannon, the prosecuting attorney, harshly criticizes Cowperwood in the closing statements. But, in the 1927 edition, though critical of Cowperwood on the surface, he compromises his condemnations with his thoughts leading up to his final arguments:

As a matter of fact, Shannon actually thought that if he had been in Cowperwood's position he would have done exactly the same thing. However, he was a newly elected district attorney. He had a record to make; and, besides, the political powers who were above him were satisfied that Cowperwood ought to be convicted for the looks of things. (355)

The Republican party has obviously bought and paid for Shannon's position, a transaction that illustrates precisely Dreiser's naturalism; greed often contradicts and suppresses justice and integrity. More important, however, is Dreiser's placement of Shannon's thoughts just before he begins his closing arguments. By doing so, Dreiser lessens the intensity of Shannon's lambasting of Cowperwood's character, exposes Shannon's hypocrisy, and reveals the treachery of the Republican party, leading the reader to disregard Shannon's closing statement and still sympathize with Cowperwood. Moreover, the addition of the lawyer's speeches shows Dreiser's impugment of those laws and institutions Mencken believed moralists hid behind. These closing arguments and Cowperwood's subsequent acquittal act as a thematic crescendo for Dreiser's purpose in revising the novel. Coerced into listening to the prosecuting attorney's private ambitions and amorality, the moral reader is led to see how hypocritical and corrupt those who represent our laws and institutions have become.

Though Cowperwood's magnetism garners a certain amount of sympathy, Dreiser gives his Nietzschean hero compassion to cleverly persuade the reading public to identify with him, not to place Frank on a pedestal. Frank still

wrongfully exploits the state treasury and commits adultery. If nothing else, examining some of the revisions reveals Dreiser as a novelist employing his artistic craft to create social commentary on the hypocrisy he found at the center of American values. Hutchisson suggests that the 1912 Cowperwood can best be understood when examining society as a “Darwinian jungle ruled by Spencerian laws” (“The Revision” 207). He further observes that “in the 1927 edition, this dialectical balance is missing, resulting in a more pessimistic view of social conditions and a more negative view of Cowperwood” (“The Revision” 207). If this is true, however, then how does one explain those passages where Cowperwood feels responsible for his father’s downfall, cries uncontrollably in front of Aileen in prison, assists Albert Stires, feels pity for Stener, sympathizes with one of the criminals who stands trial with him, and tenderly hugs his daughter before going to prison—the latter being *added* to the galleys? After Dreiser and Campbell extracted the truculent naturalistic philosophy from the 1912 edition, Cowperwood’s human side emerges and exposes the hypocrisy of those moral readers who find themselves hoping he will recover from his financial ruin. More importantly, Hutchisson never explains the reviews that indicate the reading audience in 1927 found Cowperwood amiable.

For the most part, the 1912 Cowperwood was condemned for his amoral business ethics and his affair with Aileen; many viewed Cowperwood as a villain incapable of eliciting the reader’s sympathy. One review, taken from the *Kansas City Star*, best summarizes the public’s general outlook on the 1912 Cowperwood: “Mr. Dreiser has made a bold attempt to enlist the sympathies of his readers in the personality of a hero who from the most unconventional standpoint can be considered nothing less than a scoundrel of the worst type” (7). The 1927 Cowperwood, however, as seen by the *Washington Evening Star*, is “sturdy, courageous, defiant . . . a conqueror among the less resolute, perhaps the more conscientious men around him” (8). Here, Frank’s rugged individualism is accepted, envied, and revered. Furthermore, and more importantly, many reviewers sympathize with Cowperwood rather than criticize him. As one reviewer for the *London Times Literary Supplement*

puts it, “it is possible after all to sympathize with Cowperwood. He never escaped from his class and type, but considering his standards he was not so bad” (786). Rather than denounce Cowperwood’s unethical accumulation of wealth, the public is disappointed when Dreiser shows the emptiness of a mere stockpile of money, thus making the public identify with his corrupt hero.

The Financier, though it sold better in 1927 than in 1912, was not overly successful, but all following editions of the novel are based on the 1927 text. And, it apparently accomplished what Dreiser planned when one glances through the reviews. F. O. Matthiessen suggests that “the revision of *The Financier* involved both gains and losses, though the effect of the whole is hardly more altered than Whitman’s poems ordinarily were by the endless changes that struck his wavering fancy between the various editions of *Leaves of Grass*” (150). In respect to Cowperwood’s integrity, Matthiessen has a point. Cowperwood is still amoral by the social standards of the time. Reader response, however, as seen by the reviews, demonstrates Dreiser’s skill in softening the characterization of Cowperwood to make a moral reading audience sympathetic to him. Clearly, with these revisions, Dreiser illustrated the naiveté of the American public for believing that human nature can coexist peacefully with Protestant ethics. Since Dreiser is often criticized for a lack of concision and excessive verbosity, the 1927 revisions to *The Financier* are a credit to his artistry and his maturation as a novelist.

Notes

¹ In his “The Revision of Theodore Dreiser’s *Financier*” (p. 202n), James Hutchisson reports that a document in the Dreiser Collection at the Van Pelt Library, University of Pennsylvania, has been catalogued incorrectly. What was once believed to be Campbell’s 1927 typescript carbon is actually a 1913 abridgement of the 1912 first edition. Hutchisson has discovered that this abridgement was prepared by Dreiser’s literary agent, William Lengel, for serialization in newspaper syndicates. He further notes that nothing came of the plan. Though the document is yet to be recatalogued in the Dreiser Collection, I will honor Hutchisson’s research and refer to the document as the 1913 abridgement. All unpublished Dreiser material used in this essay is done so with permission from the Trustees of the University of Pennsylvania.

² For an in-depth study of the influence business and businessmen had on the Progressive Reform Movement, see Paul Boyer’s *Urban*

Masses and Moral Order in America and Robert Wiebe's *Businessmen and Reform* and his *The Search for Order: 1877-1920*.

³ Interestingly, Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, published in 1925, also depicts a likable but corrupt businessman in Jay Gatsby. Nick Carraway, who embodies Midwestern moral values, ignores Gatsby's immoral business dealings and becomes an admirer of his by the end of the novel. Ironically, the 1927 Frank Cowperwood wields the same influence over a generally moral reading public of the 1920s.

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“Character and Success”: Teaching *Sister Carrie* in the Context of an On-going American Debate

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One of my routine assignments at Wright State University is English 356, “American Texts: 1865-1920.” This junior survey is a core requirement for English majors and strongly recommended for students seeking degrees in English education. Recently I’ve begun grouping sets of texts around cultural debates both specific to the period and characteristically “American” enough to be familiar to present-day students. One successful grouping—thanks in part to current hijinks in our nation’s capital—centers on the relationship between character and success as outlined by Theodore Roosevelt in his 1900 essay “Character and Success”¹ and as “debated” by Horatio Alger, Jr., Theodore Dreiser, and Willa Cather in *Ragged Dick* (1867), *Sister Carrie* (1900), and *The Song of the Lark* (1915), respectively. *Sister Carrie*, contemporaneous with “Character and Success,” though partly subversive of Roosevelt and the nation’s more bourgeois values, is the pivotal text. Both in its critique of American materialism and in its treatment of female sexuality, Dreiser’s novel makes intelligible for undergraduates the radical disturbances in American ideology which have marked this century.

The term begins with a rapid overview of the period 1865-1920, concentrating on the era’s industrial and economic growth, demographic shifts and conditions of labor, drawn largely from Howard Zinn’s useful *People’s History of the United States*. The first day closes with a class discussion of national politicians as cultural weather vanes. For the second day of class, students are asked to read “Character and Success,” paying close attention to what Roosevelt identifies as the chief

elements of character and to what constitutes success in the presidential (and presumably mainstream bourgeois) mind. That what they find there seems to most of them natural and true speaks to its continuing ideological force.

Roosevelt begins with a characteristic reference to sports and the upper classes, quoting “a famous Yale professor . . . in every sense of the word a man,” who maintains that “as a rule, the man who is slack in his studies will be slack in his football work; it is character that counts in both.” Roosevelt adds,

Bodily vigor is good, and vigor of intellect is even better, but far above both is character. . . . [I]n the great battle of life, no brilliancy of intellect, no perfection of bodily development, will count when weighed in the balance against that assemblage of virtues, active and passive, of moral qualities, which we group together under the name of character. (113)

More concretely, a person with character

must not steal, he must not be intemperate, he must not be vicious in any way; he must not be mean or brutal; he must not bully the weak. In fact he must refrain from whatever is evil. But besides refraining from evil, he must do good. He must be brave and energetic; he must be resolute and persevering. (118)

Given the emphasis on virility, warfare and sport throughout “Character and Success” and Roosevelt’s implicit assumption that his audience is male, students need no prompting to see that, to the turn-of-the-century mind, character was synonymous with masculinity.

For Roosevelt, however, success is not synonymous with money—and here he differs from many contemporary students’ Bill Gates-ian view of things. Money *is* important but not for its own sake. Having attained wealth one must “use [it] aright [and] help upbuild that material national prosperity which must underlie national greatness” (116). Simply having character is its own reward. Wealth or fame are not substitutes, nor can they buy what must be inborn.

Having digested “Character and Success,” students turn to the novels. Not surprisingly, *Ragged Dick* hews most closely to

the line. As I do for each novel, I ask students as they read to take notes on aspects of *Ragged Dick*'s treatment of character and success that prefigure or challenge Roosevelt's. Alger mixes his didacticism with an engaging narrative and likeable hero involved in a struggle with which my working-class students can empathize. In broad structural terms *Ragged Dick*, which concerns the impact of character and capitalism on a young adult's social and economic rise, resembles *Sister Carrie* and *The Song of the Lark*: a young American finds success in the big city via a combination of personal qualities and assistance from older, interested males. *Ragged Dick* promotes the ideology of "moral capitalism"—"a network of influences and cross-influences in which all who are in need, and who are good and industrious enough to help themselves, are given a hand on their way to the top" (Ernest 61)—absorbed and promulgated half a century later by Roosevelt: an ideology Dreiser is at pains to demystify and Cather to revise.

Alger's eponymous hero rises from homeless bootblack to salaried counting-house clerk because he is energetic, tenacious, brave, honest, persevering, studious, and morally clean from the first page to the last. "You don't catch me stealin'," states Dick just before setting out "with energy and industry" to earn his breakfast with shines (3, 8). Roosevelt and his Yale professor require of young men athleticism and scholarship; Dick saves Mr. Rockwell's child from drowning and so impresses that capitalist with his penmanship and arithmetic that he is rewarded with a job. Dick's unfailing cheer and ability to laugh at and repair his and others' misfortunes auger a future both wealthy and wholesome. Sex is not at issue for our fourteen-year-old hero, but waiting in the wings is the future prize of his purity, nine-year-old Ida Greyson. With only a job and a savings account at the novel's close Dick is by no means wealthy, but he is successful—"a young gentleman on his way to fame and fortune" (132).

Even Dick's flaws indicate character. His extravagance—squandering his earnings at the Old Bowery Theatre and Tony Pastor's and treating less fortunate boys to "spreads"—points to an innate generosity which will later permit him to "use his wealth aright." He smokes, gambles and drinks "sometimes" but

once he finds the first of his wealthy role models in Mr. Whitney, Dick learns to prefer putting his money in a savings bank to minor debauchery. Despite a poor upbringing, Dick's "nature was a noble one, and had saved him from all mean faults" (7). When role model number two, Mr. Greyson, asks Dick, "Who taught you to be honest?" Dick replies, "Nobody. But it's mean to cheat or steal, *I've always knowed that*" (71-2, italics added).

If manliness, vigor and resolve are essential components of character and success, Carrie Meeber would appear to be doomed from the start of her adventures—an expectation Dreiser deliberately toys with by adopting the "fallen woman" as his apparent focus. But Dreiser is less concerned with exploring the possibility of women's having character, or with redefining character in less gendered terms, than with demolishing the ideology of moral capitalism. To do so, however, he relies on existing discourses about character.

Before the class begins reading *Sister Carrie* I like to point out that Dreiser terms her "a fair example of the American middle class"(4), implying that her character is more real than ideal. I also give them Dreiser's appraisal of H. L. Mencken's essay on Roosevelt: "You have that big Rhinoceros measured exactly" (*Letters* 1: 297). Mencken's essay is optional reading for my students, but "Rhinoceros" is generally enough to suggest to even the least perceptive that Dreiser and Roosevelt may not agree on essentials. Dreiser has so liberally salted the text with comments on Carrie's character that my students have no difficulty noting her difference from the ideal: she is "drifting" and "yielding," hardly a scholar, and more attuned to the "moral significance" of her clothes than of her actions (7). Before she meets Ames, books are "beyond her interest—knowledge a sealed book" (4). Where Ragged Dick learns to look for respectability in his savings book, Carrie finds what satisfaction she can in consuming, answering the siren call of shoes and laces, jackets and skirts, moving to ever more posh quarters as her means permit. When at the last students find her at the Waldorf reading Balzac and "sorry for the people who haven't got anything," they also find her yawning and inert rather than energetically using her wealth aright (495). The

chameleon quality which makes her so successful a stage presence would, for Roosevelt, mark her as having no character at all.

Dreiser makes clear that character is not innate, but learned. Not active virtue but “the drag of habit” runs the person of character:

The victim of habit, when he has neglected the thing which was customary with him to do, feels a little scratching in the brain, a little irritating something which comes of being out of the rut, and imagines it to be the prick of conscience, the still small voice that is urging him ever to righteousness. (77-78)

When we first approach this passage, my students tend to agree with Dreiser, even though his dismissal of virtue is at odds with the truths they found in “Character and Success.” In their writing and discussion I encourage them not to resolve the contradiction but to try to understand the social mechanisms which might produce or even require holding both views. Often we can derive some first principles for materialist or feminist critique which can make future encounters with critical theory less overwhelming.² Dreiser’s subsequent reflections on “Carrie’s mental state” let students see the author working with those same first principles, as he delineates the arbitrariness, the meretriciousness of society’s judgments of men and women and the formative pressure economics has on character.

As Lawrence E. Hussman has pointed out, the Generation X student finds it difficult to construe Carrie’s sex life as a fall into vice. What they do find vicious, however, is her refusal to share her early theatrical earnings with Hurstwood. “After all,” the post-feminist in the room pipes up, “he supported her when she wasn’t working.” While this take on her character lacks historical nuance, it does bring to light the emphasis on monetary transactions as a measure of worth in American culture then and now. One cannot have *moral* capitalism without *capitalism*. And capitalism means amassing and spending money. Roosevelt and Alger may argue that merely having character is a kind of success, but Dreiser makes explicit what is implicit in the previous texts: having capital is the only mark of success that counts in a capitalist society and how one

uses capital is an index of character. As Carrie's fiscal comfort increases so does her respectability—in this she is exactly like Ragged Dick—though she cannot be said to have changed much in character. No less didactic than Alger, Dreiser offers students several sermons on “the true meaning of money.” The opening pages of chapters six and seven are particularly suited to group discussion of this theme.

Though Dreiser's own class awareness gives him perspective on the ideology of American capitalism, he is less successful at escaping common notions of gender. Women are “peculiarly sensitive to the personal adornment or equipment of their person”(22), their celebrated intuition limited to perceptions about dress and household furnishings. Carrie's success on stage is the product of her “sensitive, receptive nature, her barometric feelings and almost hopeless lack of logic” (158) combined with her beauty, rather than her skill or training. The women in *Sister Carrie* exhibit varying levels of self-absorption, consumerism, display, passivity, and avarice. But if the average American's *conscience* is simply habit enforced by environment (those “excellent home principles” [78]), surely the average woman's sensitivity to clothing and awareness of her physical attractions are similarly the product of environmental forces. In a male-dominated market culture, women fill the dual role of consumer commodity and commodity consumer. But while Dreiser knows man is the product of his material conditions, and *Sister Carrie* in part illustrates that Marxian chestnut, Dreiser seems incapable of making the step to imagining woman as the product of her material conditions. To debunk moral capitalism, Dreiser needs a passive, irresolute and morally ambiguous young American, one without manly qualities. What could be less manly than a female?³ Whatever the virtues of his oeuvre, on the topic of gender, Dreiser is as much a man of his generation as Roosevelt.

Students comparing structural elements of *Sister Carrie*, *Ragged Dick*, and *The Song of the Lark* will notice that tales of moral capitalism, like other fairy tales, feature helpers—in the case of capital the better term might be “backers.” Carrie succeeds neither despite her liabilities nor because of her virtues but because she makes the right connections. Like Ragged Dick

before her, and Thea Kronborg after her, Carrie benefits from older men who, well, take an interest in her. That Drouet's and Hurstwood's intentions are more frolicsome than philanthropic makes no difference in terms of outcomes, but does serve to underscore gender and sexuality as powerful, if excluded, terms in the rhetoric of moral capitalism.⁴ Students will note that Drouet's "assistance" is a virtual parody of the help given Ragged Dick: timely gifts of clothing, cash tips, and a professional entrée. The nature of Hurstwood's assistance is more problematic—Carrie's efforts toward success seem to increase in direct proportion to her contempt for him.

Because Dreiser relies so heavily on existing discourses about character and success to demystify moral capitalism, certain discordances arise. Carrie's rags to riches story both reverses and depends upon Hurstwood's fall from riches to rags. The only character to fail utterly in *Sister Carrie*, Hurstwood as first introduced appears to be an exemplar of "Character and Success," having "risen by perseverance and industry through long years of service . . . to his present altitude" (43). Likewise in the details of his fall Hurstwood appears exemplary. Applying the Roosevelt rubric, students may locate the origins of Hurstwood's failure in lust, dishonesty, irresolution, and enervation. But in each case, Dreiser is careful to point out the workings of accident: his marriage is stale, the safe clicks shut, he loses the lease on the Warren Street Resort, his age wears on him.⁵

Dreiser would have Carrie's rise equally the result of accident, but as Hurstwood crumbles she increasingly displays signs of character, exhibiting "genial good nature" (313) over the challenges of New York housekeeping, energy in her search for theatrical work (and in her chorus line head-tossing), and resolution in shedding herself of Hurstwood. Carrie's career prospers as she exhibits quick thinking ("I am yours truly" [431]) and willingness to learn, and, apparently, adopts celibacy ("it incited her to coolness and indifference" [456]).

With the late entry of Bob Ames, another discordance arises. Ames joins a long line of inventors real and imaginary who signify American ingenuity and character in novels of moral capitalism. My more structurally-inclined students

recognize that, as in *Ragged Dick*, the successful inventor speaks for the author. But Ames employs distinctly Rooseveltian terms when he says, "If you have powers, cultivate them," and he advises Carrie to work for the sake of working well. Ames values learning, does not drink, and is frank and wholesomely manly. Dreiser echoes Roosevelt and Alger both, making Ames "innocent and clean," which Carrie finds "exceedingly pleasant" (335). Thus, with Ames, as with Hurstwood's fall and Carrie's theatrical success, Dreiser appears to embrace some of the very terms he set out to destabilize.

Alerting students to these discordances helps to introduce or refine the concept of the novel as product of unique material conditions and common ideological positions. *Sister Carrie* embodies contradictions already present in American culture at the turn of the century, contradictions which Cather will not entirely escape either and students may recognize in themselves. If Dreiser wishes to critique bourgeois notions of morality, his "immoral" woman must somehow succeed recognizably. If he wishes to emphasize how crass and empty the values of the marketplace are, he must adopt moral terms. Dreiser cannot exclude one half of the ideological equation and remain intelligible. In *Sister Carrie's* instability lies its quintessential Americanness.

By the time students open *The Song of the Lark* they should be able to recognize its structural and conceptual similarity to the two previous novels. Like *Ragged Dick*, Thea Kronborg succeeds because she is frank, energetic, ambitious, resolute. Like Carrie, she succeeds despite poor parenting and pre-marital sex. Thea's disinterested helpers are four—Doctor Archie and Ray Kennedy provide capital and fatherly affection, and Professor Wunsch and Andor Harsanyi offer training, advice and inspiration. A fifth helper, Fred Ottenberg, is motivated by sexual desire as well as admiration for Thea's character and abilities. He is also, like Archie, trapped in an unhappy marriage which his position and respectability will not allow him to leave, introducing elements of Hurstwood into the mix.

Cather is more interested in the problems she has set herself in writing an American *künstlerroman* than in Dreiserian social criticism or Algerian affirmation. Central to

apprenticeship novels is character, and students find Cather using familiar terms. The martial imagery used to describe Thea's struggle to master her art particularly evokes the imagery in "Character and Success." Thea has a "way of charging at difficulties. She ran to meet them as if they were foes she had long been seeking, seized them as if they were destined for her and she for them" (159). The "fortunate accidents"(xxxi) aiding Thea's rise, while less implausible than those befalling Ragged Dick, still partake of that "pattern of influences and cross-influences" by which moral capitalism assists the deserving and industrious.

For Cather, here and elsewhere,⁶ the pursuit of the dollar is precisely what makes American culture smug, domestic, self-satisfied, provincial and ignorant. Cather attempts to replace moral capitalism with something more like moral craftsmanship—that attention to one's art which raises the individual above the overall pettiness of American life. Thea has the moral advantage of early religious instruction over both Dick and Carrie. But the religious (Dick) or ethical (Carrie) instruction so important to helping one swallow whole the inconsistencies of moral capitalism is not what Cather is after. What the artist achieves through character and effort is nothing less than being born again.

But *The Song of the Lark* takes place in essentially the same world as *Sister Carrie* and *Ragged Dick*. Money counts. And, since Thea, too, comes from small means, Cather gives the same attention to nickel-and-dime accounting, the frustrations of poor and inadequate clothing and cramped quarters, and the temptations of easy money. The freight carried by gifts of money in all three novels and the mixed motives of the male helpers invite comparison. Gifts of money do not carry sexual overtones in *Ragged Dick*, students will notice. That they do in *Sister Carrie* and *Song of the Lark* not only points to quaint historical reality—"that's how things were back then," says a student, ignoring the daily patronage-and-sex reports out of Washington—but also to how gender continues to be a destabilizing factor in discourses on character and success.

Keeping gender's destabilizing force in mind while comparing Thea and Carrie as *characters* can help students

refine their feminist or materialist first principles. Novice feminists, for example, may be tempted to essentialize: Dreiser can't imagine a woman with character because he's a man; Cather can because she's a woman. But in the cash and commodity culture Dreiser delineates, sex is simply another transaction. Dreiser's achievement is to bracket Carrie's sexuality off from bourgeois morality, while presenting the bourgeois marketplace as itself of questionable morality. Cather may dismiss Thea's brief affair with Fred as inconsequential but is either unwilling or unable to resist bourgeois convention by "redeeming" her with marriage to Fred in the Epilogue.

Finally, like Dreiser, Cather confronts the emptiness of success—even artistic success—in market culture. For Dreiser both struggle and success are empty signifiers. Cather is less overt, because she does subscribe to the elements of "character and success" even as she modifies them, but there is more than a suggestion in the Epilogue that Cather believes the rewards offered the artist by American culture are paltry. Returning to Roosevelt at the end of the term, we ask ourselves whether success as our culture understands it is worth the effort.

In English 356 I try to present the novels as complex rather than flawed—as texts at war with themselves just as culture and ideology are complex and at war with one another. The other texts on my syllabus change frequently; those changes often bring more diverse attitudes toward character and success into the debate or even change our understanding of elements of the core texts. My students surprise me each term with their passion and their growth, and I believe they are surprised that century-old texts aren't necessarily yesterday's news.

Notes

¹ Published in the *Outlook*, March 31, and collected in *The Strenuous Life* in 1901.

² As I also teach our upper division and graduate theory courses I like to smooth the way as much as possible.

³ It is sometimes useful to ask students to imagine the novel as *Brother Ted*.

⁴ Even if that sexuality is sublimated, as appears to have been the case with Alger and his street Arabs.

⁵ Dreiser does not add, though the historian might, that the national economy is still recovering from the crash of '93 during Hurstwood's New York period.

⁶ This criticism motivates *The Professor's House*, *A Lost Lady*, and the stories collected in *Youth and the Bright Medusa*, as well as *The Song of the Lark*, and underlies her sympathetic portrayal of immigrants and Indians—who can imagine a life beyond money—almost throughout her oeuvre.

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Review

Paul W. Orlov. *An American Tragedy: The Perils of the Self Seeking "Success."* Cranbury, NJ: Bucknell UP, 1998. 242 pp. \$41.50, hardback.

Orlov interprets *An American Tragedy* not as a major example of American literary naturalism but as an expression of Dreiser's "anti-naturalistic" premises and his "defense" of selfhood. Orlov contends that the novel "implicitly articulates [Dreiser's] profound concern about a materialistic society's subversion of the principle and dignity of selfhood" (219). At the center of Orlov's need to reassess Dreiser's conception of the self is Orlov's definition of tragedy and the requisite role of moral responsibility. He argues, most importantly, that a protagonist cannot achieve tragic stature without "moral involvement in his own evolving 'fate'" (10). Thus, Orlov's close reading endeavors to reveal that Dreiser's novel evinces such a definition of tragedy, and that Clyde Griffiths' fate is determined not only by chance and the forces of heredity and/or environment, but by his own will.

To support his reading, Orlov examines closely the complicated and varied concept of literary naturalism and the elements and limits of naturalism found in the novel. He concludes that Dreiser's depiction of the self and selfhood "transcends" the naturalistic premises of identity, which define it primarily in terms of heredity and/or environment. In fact, Orlov maintains that the novel reveals Dreiser's assertion that society distorts a person's identity, that society suggests that the self is "a sum of social and economic status marks rather than an essence created by qualities of thought and feeling, of inner nature" (103). Thus, the characters' tragic experiences are caused by their vain attempts to achieve meaningful selfhood through appearances and possessions, to achieve what Orlov

calls “an identity of ‘success’” (103). Orlov’s interpretation climaxes with a reassessment of the extent and nature of the characters’ moral responsibility in the story. Paying particular attention to the final portion of Book II, from Roberta’s discovery that she is pregnant to her tragic death on Big Bittern, he demonstrates that the novel depicts Clyde as a “victim not just of chance and deterministic forces but also his own actions,” that his desiring and wishing are equivalent to willing (179). Thus, Clyde is a moral agent who is victimized not only by society’s materialistic conception of the self but by his own “desperate selfishness ironically born of his need to become a self” (220).

Those scholars who share Orlov’s definition of tragedy will find his book an engaging and persuasive scholarly book. However, for those scholars, like this reader, who do not share Orlov’s definition of tragedy nor see Dreiser or his novel embracing it, the book will seem to labor too hard and to rely on too many abstract and elusive terms—such as “moral,” “meaningful selfhood,” “essence,” and “being”—in the attempt to make the novel’s representation of the human self satisfy the author’s definition of tragedy. In fact, for many scholars, Orlov’s argument will seem to go against the very essence of Dreiser’s philosophy, a philosophy that argues that tragedy results from our inability to perceive that we are controlled and determined by forces that we neither understand nor control, and that in our ignorance and blindness, we still create laws and customs, create concepts such as “moral responsibility” to govern, often tragically, this self, this life we do not fully comprehend. As Dreiser states in *Newspaper Days*, “[c]ure nature itself first, or better yet arrange life—our life according to the dictates of nature—that is accept nature according to her own rules, and there will not be so much moral agony” (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1991, 145). Thus, as we witness the events of Clyde Griffiths’ and Roberta Alden’s lives unfold, Dreiser hopes we will share the pathos of their experience, for, unlike us, they, and the society that judges them, do not understand the forces that have shaped and determined their tragic ends.

— John W. Reynolds, University of Connecticut

News & Notes

In Memoriam

Dr. Vera Dreiser, niece of novelist Theodore Dreiser, died on November 17th, 1998, of natural causes in Macon, Georgia.

Dr. Dreiser was born in New York City on May 11, 1908. Her father, Edward Dreiser, was the youngest of the Dreiser family. She received her Ed.D at New York University in 1944 and was certified as a psychologist by the New York State Department of Mental Hygiene in 1945.

She was a member of Pi Lambda Theta honor society for women in education. She was included in the first edition of *Who's Who of America Women*, *Who's Who in the East*, *Who's Who is New York*, and was a member of ASCAP. She was chairman of the Dancer's War Fund of Greater New York (1941-42), and wrote a monthly column for *Dance News*.

Dr. Dreiser was a consulting psychologist, who had a practice in New York City, was Senior Psychologist at the Brooklyn Center for Psychotherapy, and was Head of the Psychiatric Treatment Center at the California Institution for Women.

In 1976, she wrote *My Uncle Theodore: An Intimate Family Portrait*, a family memoir about the Dreisers: the novelist Theodore (*An American Tragedy*, *Sister Carrie*), songwriter Paul Dresser ("On the Banks of the Wabash," "My Gal Sal"), and her father Edward, an actor who appeared in such Broadway plays as *Soldiers of Fortune*, *The Climbers*, and *Paid in Full*.

She married Alfred E. Scott in 1939. He died in 1948. They had one daughter, Tedi Dreiser Godard.

A private memorial service was held in New York on November 29th.

Call for Papers

The Dreiser Society will have two sessions (as yet untitled) at the American Literature Association conference, 27-30 May 1999, at the Renaissance Harborplace Hotel, Baltimore.

Proposals for papers (title and synopsis) should be sent to:

James L.W. West
Institute for Arts and Humanities
Ihlseng Cottage Penn State University
University Park, PA 16802
email: jlw14@psu.edu

Information on the conference, including instructions for joining the ALA and registering for the conference, is available at <http://english.byu.edu/cronin/ala.htm>

Dreiser Edition

The Pennsylvania Edition of *The Financier* is in production and is expected to be published in the Summer of 1999.